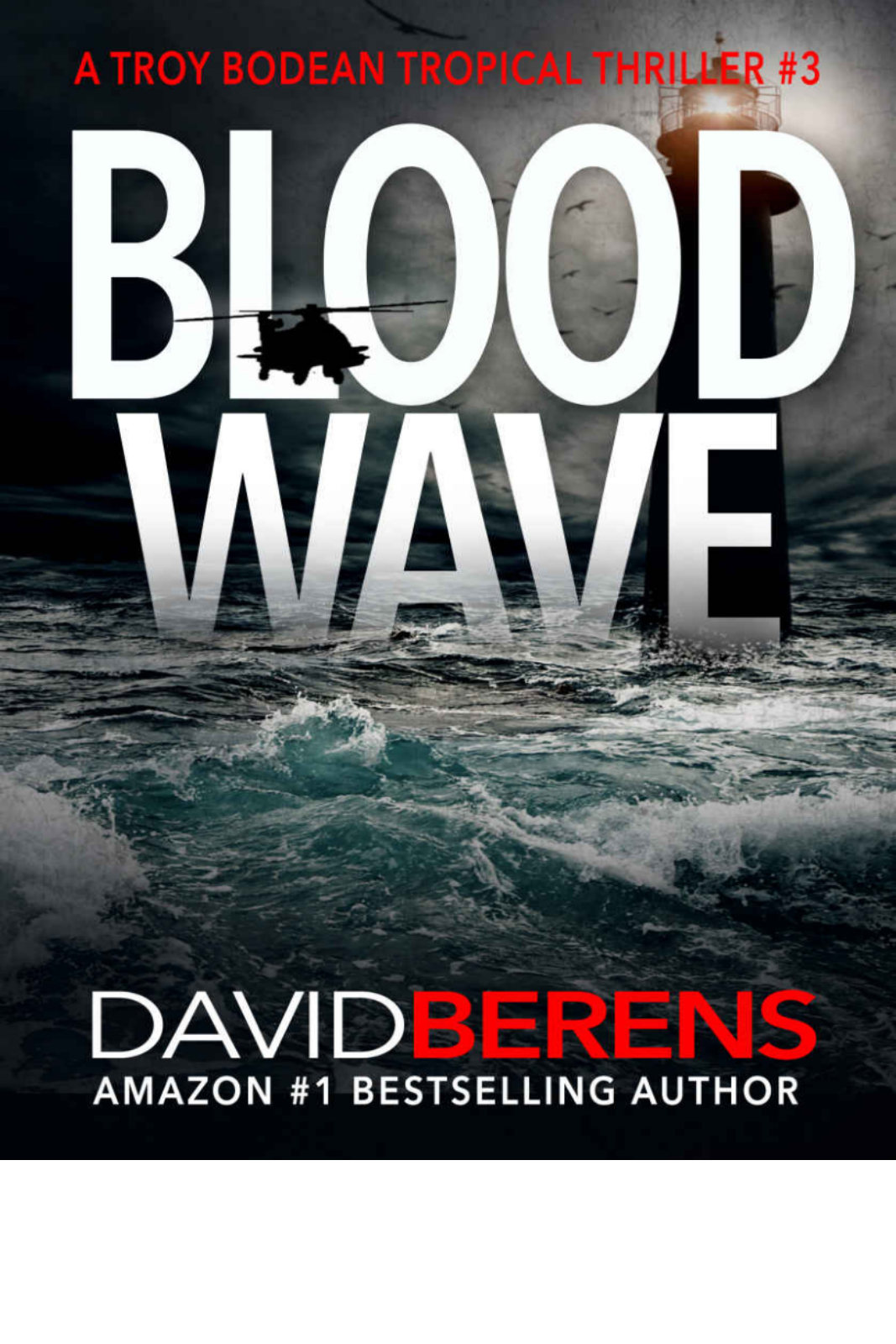


A TROY BODEAN TROPICAL THRILLER #3

BLOOD WAVE



DAVID **BERENS**

AMAZON #1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Blood Wave

A Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller #3

David Berens



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*For Mary Ann and Jim.
You never told me I couldn't do it.*

Part I

Light The Way



“When you light a candle, you also cast a shadow.”

-Ursula K. Le Guin

Prologue

There's A Light...

Being careful not to get any of the girl's blood on him, Adrian

Hull—known as Taz to his friends—broke the bones in her arms, crushed between his foot and the floor. She was petite, so they didn't offer much resistance. Once he was through with that, he proceeded to break her femurs. Those took a bit more doing, but he was strong and they eventually gave way. After this gruesome work was done, she fit perfectly into the chest that had once held the oil for the light at the top of the Cape Florida Lighthouse on Key Biscayne.

It was the perfect place to hide a body, as it had been sitting empty and unused since the Miami Centennial celebration in July 1996. And, of course, it no longer ran on oil, so there was very little chance anyone would open the decorative chest anyway.

As he made his way down the spiral staircase, he noticed he'd smudged a little bit of her blood on his pristine white shoe.

"Dammit all," he muttered, wiping the stained heel with his hand, but the blood refused to budge. Wearing all white was the standard at The Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden, so he'd have to get the stain out, or get some new ones before he started his shift.

Linda *Big Boobs* Morgenstern was his first lesson of the day. He glanced down at his watch: 7:21 am. Plenty of time. She always booked him at eight and showed up at 8:15, sometimes 8:30.

He creaked open the door at the base of the lighthouse and peeked out. The beach at the south end of the island was deserted. He stepped out onto the sand, removed his shoes, and flung them as far as he could out into the surf.

Immediately after doing so, he realized it was a big mistake. The tide would surely bring them right back in to shore. He waded out in the rising tide, scrounging around for the sneakers. He found one of them, the clean one.

"Shit," he mumbled, and threw the shoe as far as he could back into the water.

Maybe they'd disappear or maybe even get eaten by a shark. And

maybe the salt water would dissolve the blood anyway. Too many maybes.

He took off his socks and started jogging back down the beach. A few early morning runners were out, but not many tourists. Most of them were looking down at Fitbits or lost in their earbuds, so they never even noticed him—he was invisible. And that invisibility was what had gotten him into this mess in the first place.

Caroline had been so cute. She'd taken tennis lessons from him since her senior year of high school, and he'd been certain she was interested in him. They had shared so much time together and she had worn more and more revealing outfits for their lessons—which, of course, meant she wanted him to look at her lithe body. Remembering the sheen of sweat on her after an intense workout sent a thrill through him, and he mildly regretted he'd had to kill her. But only mildly.

The trouble had all started last night. They'd been on the courts after nine... alone. Even Betty the desk clerk had gone home, and he'd promised he'd lock up. They played for over two hours... off the clock. Wasn't that worth something to her? He replayed the scene in his mind, over and over, wishing he could take it all back.

The heat flush on her cheeks and her million-dollar smile had made her irresistible. Taz had read the situation wrong and leaned in and kissed her. She immediately slapped him on the cheek, and hard.

"What the hell?" she demanded, pushing back from him.

"But, I thought—" he started.

"Well you thought wrong, asshole."

The sudden vehemence of her reaction startled him. They'd been together for so long now.

"I have a boyfriend," she yelled as she stood up and started shoving her gear into her bag, "and you're just a piece of shit tennis pro."

Taz could feel the anger rising in him. It was always this way at The Ritz. He was *the help*, a lower class of person.

"I mean, really, Taz?" she said as she started walking away.

He fought the sudden burning hate inside him and tried desperately to rescue the situation. "Wait, Caroline. Ah was jus' playin' 'round. Let's jus' forget the whole thing."

She turned back toward him and thrust a finger into his chest. "Forget the whole thing? Are you frickin' kidding me?"

Tears formed in her eyes, apparently from the sudden rage.

"No, I won't be forgetting the whole thing," she said, and jabbed him with each word. "First, I'm going to get you fired. Then, I'm going to tell my boyfriend—who by the way is a wrestler at the University of Miami. And last..."

Adrian Taz Hull felt his world crashing down on him. He'd worked so hard to get out of Tasmania, and had found this amazing job at The Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden. They'd gone to a lot of trouble to get his visa taken care of, to get him this position, and even rented a place for him to live in another employee's name (slightly shady, but, eh, he didn't care). He'd likely be denied any further stay in the United States; there would be no green card, and he'd likely be deported ASAP. That's when she let the hammer fall.

"And last, I'm going to tell my father," —she put her hands on her hips— "and when his lawyers are through with you, you'll wish you were dead."

His vision misted red and the next few seconds happened in super slow motion. Without thinking, he unleashed a backhand with his tennis racket. Unfortunately, his one-handed backhand had often been compared to the legends of the game—Rod Laver, Pete Sampras and Roger Federer—as being one of the hardest hit strokes... ever.

Her head snapped sideways and teeth went flying in a spray of blood.

"Fookin' bitch," he muttered as she slumped to the ground.

As he realized what had happened, he dropped his racket and fell to his knees beside her.

"Aw, shit, Caroline," he said, and put his hands under her neck.

He could feel loose bones working around under her skin. She was stone-cold dead. No passing go, no collecting two-hundred dollars, straight to jail dead.

His mind raced. *Call the cops?* No, that was a short route to extradition to jail in Tasmania. Betty was the only person at the club who'd known he was here with her, but that wasn't unusual. Caroline usually walked down to her lessons from the Grand Bay Resort & Residences where her father owned the entire top floor penthouse, but for some reason, she'd driven tonight. Her brand-new, fire engine red 718 Boxster S Porsche was sitting out front.

He dragged her body into the bathroom and shoved her into a stall. He'd have plenty of time to get the car up to South Beach. So many beautiful girls disappeared up there, she'd be just one more of a thousand cases. The connection with him would end when they found her car.

He screamed through traffic, admiring the three-hundred horsepower beast of a car, and parked it in a public lot near Club Opium. He didn't bother to pay the attendant; he just jumped out of the car and jogged to the nearest bus stop. An hour and a half later he was back on Key Biscayne hauling her body down the beach. It had taken him longer than he planned, most of the night actually. But as dawn broke, he felt he'd done all he could to distance himself from

the unfortunate incident.

He unlocked the clubhouse door and let himself in. Betty hadn't gotten in yet, so he had time to grab a new pair of shoes from the stock room, jump in the shower, and change into a new set of tennis whites. He dumped the old ones into the laundry and walked out into the lobby.

Betty was here now and scribbling some notes on the court reservation sheets.

"Good morning, Taz," she said, smiling. "Linda's here. Can you believe it? Early for once."

"Crikey, that's a first," he said, raising his eyebrows.

"How'd it go last night with Caroline?"

"Aah, ya know," he said, sounding as casual as possible, "same as always. Workin' on that ridiculous two-handed backhand."

She laughed. "Good, good. I have a message here that her sister wants to get a lesson in tonight. You're a popular man!"

Sister. Caroline had a twin sister—Mindy. She was never as good at tennis as Caroline had been, but she was just as cute. Maybe cuter.

Taz felt his mood lift. He was back in the game.

"Ah reckon that's alright," he said and winked at Betty. "Get her in at seven, then."

"You got it, Taz," she said as he grabbed his racket from his desk.

With horror, he spotted blood all over the top of it. He quickly grabbed a guest towel from the counter and wiped it clean before the kindly desk clerk looked up.

"Linda's out on court five," she said and waved toward the door, "and don't get caught staring at her chest again, young man." She was smirking and shaking her head.

"Me? Ha! Ah nevah get caught," —he winked at her and lowered sunglasses over his eyes— "got me shades!"

Walking out to the court, he caught a glimpse of Linda. She was wearing an insanely small and tight sports bra stretched to its limit over massive fake boobs. And thank the gods... it was white. Her shorts were skin-tight over what the Miami boys called a glorious booty. She was jumping up and down, swinging her arms back and forth in a ridiculous routine to prepare for her lesson. Taz felt his excitement growing. Today was going to be a great day after all.

He headed out into the sunshine feeling like a new man.

Troy Clint Bodean tilted his Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy

hat back on his head, took his Costa Del Mar Pescador sunglasses off his blue eyes, and wiped the sweat from his forehead and face with his red bandana. The sun was scorching and the pristine white sand burned his feet and the seat of his trunks. He could feel the salt from the ocean and the sweat drying on his skin. The air was briny and thick, reminding him of the hottest days back in Louisiana. Offshore, in the distance, a black cloud skirted the horizon. Sometimes the afternoon storms would come in and sometimes they wouldn't. The tinny sound of his old-school antenna radio bleated out the local Danger Dave Radio show. Ol' Dave was in rare form today, playing plenty of Stones, Beatles and Zeppelin. Troy turned it up and slipped his sunglasses back over his eyes.

Children were laughing and screaming and running and swimming in every direction. The cacophony didn't bother him though. As long as the ocean waves kept crashing, he was doin' fine. A girl of about twelve was floundering in a two-person sailboat and Troy knew the call would come soon enough... but he decided to wait it out.

"Hey, Tony-boy!" called a man's whiny voice from the garish tiki hut up by the pool.

Troy didn't look back at the man. "It's Troy, Don. Troy."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Don said. "You gonna get out theyah and help that girl bring our boat back?"

Don Henderson, the manager of The Ritz-Carlton's beach services, was not Australian, but for some reason he affected an Australian accent. He had thinning red hair, transparently white skin, and at least one-hundred freckles per square inch on his face. He was definitely not the type of person who should spend more than ten minutes on the beach for fear of dramatic sunburn. Troy hated him... but he was the boss.

"Yup." Troy stood slowly, working out the cricks in his back. "I'll get 'er in."

He half-waded, half-swam out to where the girl was drifting around, and grabbed the rope on the front of the boat. It took him the better part of fifteen minutes and a pretty good gash on his right hand to tow her back to the shore. Her mother, who hadn't realized the girl was in any distress, tucked a dollar bill into Troy's hand and thanked him for his trouble.

"No trouble at all, ma'am," he said, and tipped his hat and shoved the money into his pocket.

He'd collected a whopping total of eight dollars today. It wasn't much, but it would pay for at least two nights of bar tabs at the Sonesta if Gino was working, maybe three.

The black cloud offshore had rolled in closer, and suddenly a crack of lightning danced down to the water. A loud boom of thunder followed seconds later. Looked like this one was rolling in.

"Get 'em in, Troy!" called Don, "I'm outta heyah."

Troy nodded and grabbed an air horn from the nearest sailboat. He raised it into the air and blasted it three times—the universal signal for all of the Ritz-Carlton's boats, surf boards, canoes, jet skis, and paddle boards to come back to shore. It would be up to him to get all the riders safely back to the beach. Don wouldn't be helping, that was for sure.

People were starting to shake the sand from their towels and stuff belongings into expensive designer beach bags as the wind began to blow. Huge drops of rain suddenly pelted down on the sand, nearly causing it to sizzle.

Troy dragged boat after boat and board after board up onto the sand and chained them together to secure them for the night. The drops turned to sheets of rain and Troy let it wash the salt from his skin. When he dragged the last board up the beach, he found a white shoe tangled up in the tow-line. It looked fairly new, so he shrugged and tossed it into the plastic bin by the door that held his belongings during his shift—someone might claim it.

Tugging on his old Tortuga Adventures t-shirt, he locked the tiki hut door and started down the beach toward the Sonesta. Gino would be working tonight and he had eight dollars in his pocket. Life was good.



THE SONESTA RESORT ON KEY BISCAIYNE was one of the last holdovers from the seventies construction boom on the island. It had tiered landings on the ends that staggered all the way to the top floor, making it look as if a cruise ship had been parked on the beach. Its tenure on the island was going to be cut short by new construction,

starting whenever the funding was approved. Troy hated that thought. It was a groovy place tucked in with all the pastel Miami crap that had gone up recently. The best part was the pool bar. It was tiny. Eight people could sit around the bar on shiny chrome stools with red leather cushioned tops—if they were okay with their elbows touching. The bar itself was just a crappy white laminate counter on a base wrapped with straw. Someone had decided it would be a tiki bar at some point, and the effect was less than tropical. And unless you knew the bartender, the drinks were more expensive than the ones sloshed out on South Beach. Good for Troy, he knew the bartender.

Troy could hear Gino's music blaring out on the sand as he got closer to the Sonesta's beachside entrance. *Lola*, by the Kinks. He played it at least five times a night and paraded around the bar thumping his chest and belting out the quasi-transgender lyrics with gusto as his tourist guests laughed, sang along, and stuffed money in his tip jar. He emptied his jar more than five times a night.

Taking the steps up to the pool deck three at a time, Troy ducked under the cover of the bar's tin roof. He took off his hat and shook the rain out of his hair.

"Troy, my friend!" Gino shouted over the tops of the tourists crowded around his bar, "you made it."

"Yup," —Troy tilted his bearded chin back at the bartender— "was a good day on the beach, until the squall hit."

"Squall?" Gino laughed. "That was hardly a whimper!"

A particularly amorous couple got up from the bar. The man was salt and pepper gray and the girl was South Beach plastic blonde. Troy figured he knew exactly what was going on there and tipped his head to them as they walked past him toward the Oceana. *That room is probably rented by the hour*, he thought.

Gino rushed over and mopped the bar in front of Troy. He was wearing his trademark navy blue Hawaiian shirt with giant orange flowers all over it tucked into ridiculously tight white shorts. His mustache was another holdover from the seventies and his hair was a mop of loose, wavy auburn curls. Some of the older ladies who frequented his bar thought he was a dead ringer for Tom Selleck.

"The usual, my friend?" Gino grinned, holding up a bottle of one-hundred fifty-one proof rum.

"You know me too well," Troy said and smiled, "but I'll just go with a Corona tonight."

"Absolutely." Gino slid the bottle of rum back onto its shelf.

"Let's make that two," a girl said from behind Troy.

He turned toward her and arched his eyebrow. The voice belonged to a cute young girl who couldn't possibly have been older than twenty... ish. Her hair was streaked with blonde, but it looked

natural, like the sun had bleached it. Her skin matched that too; brown and smooth. Her nose was freckled, but not obnoxiously so, and her eyes were green... forest green. Deep and dark, but clear and iridescent—*did I just think the word iridescent*, Troy thought? She wore a tight white tank top and dark denim shorts. Both were clearly expensive designer pieces, designed to look worn in just the right way.

"Darlin'," Troy started, "I'm happy to buy you a beer, but does your mama know you're out and about cavortin' with strangers?"

She laughed and winked at Gino. He exchanged a friendly smile with her and popped the top off two Coronas and shoved a lime into each.

"This one is on me," Gino said, and walked away to tend to other patrons.

She squeezed the lime into the beer and slid onto the barstool next to Troy.

"Strangers, eh?" she asked. "Guess you haven't been around the Oceana much. And my mother has been gone for years."

"Dangit, sorry about your mom." Troy winced.

"Oh, she's not dead. Don't be sorry." The girl shook her head. "But she was a conniving bitch that ran off with my dad's lawyer."

"I see. Well, I've only been here a coupla months," Troy said, squinting. "What's that gotta do with anything?"

"My dad owns the top floor." She pointed toward the penthouse.

Aw, *hell*, thought Troy. He remembered a long-forgotten line from a David Lee Roth song about messin' with the mayor's daughter, or something along those lines.

"Mindy?" he asked. "As in, Mindy—my father created Mortgage-Finder.com—Colpiller?"

"Yours truly," she said and smiled.

"Pleasure to meet you." Troy held up a finger toward Gino. "Check, please?"

"Oh, come on now," she said, tugging his arm down, "you can't just buy me a beer and then bug out 'cause you know who my dad is."

"Number one, I didn't buy you a beer. Gino did." He eased up off the stool. "And number two, yes, I can."

She sighed heavily. "Just like all the rest. I'm never going to meet any guys who aren't afraid of my father."

Gino swooped in and sat two fresh Coronas on the bar, even though they had barely taken a sip of the first couple he'd served them. He whirled away before Troy could protest.

"I bought you that one," she said, "so you might as well stay long enough to drink it. I'll leave you alone."

"Well, I didn't mean..." Troy started.

She stood up, clinked her beer against his with a sad look in her

eyes, and walked around to the other side of the bar.

Dangit, Troy thought.

He took a sip of beer and noticed Gino looking at him, shaking his head.

“What?” he said with a shrug.

The bartender leaned in to speak softly. “She has no friends, amigo. She’s sheltered and protected in a way you and I will never understand.”

“Yeah, but I don’t need no friends,” Troy protested.

“You may not,” —Gino wiped the already-clean bar— “but she does. She’s harmless. Just wants company.”

“Dangit,” Troy muttered and jerked his thumb toward the blender behind the bar, “gimme two of those one fifty-one piña coladas.”

“Aha!” Gino slapped his chest. “That’s the spirit!”

He clicked a button on his radio and *Lola* blared out again. The blender whizzed as the crowd woke up and started singing along. Gino slid the drinks to Troy.

I’m gon’ regret this, Troy thought. He held up the two drinks toward Mindy and inclined his head back as if to say, *come on over*. She laughed and nodded.

She sat down and held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Mindy.”

“Troy,” he said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“You too.” She pulled out her phone and clicked out a text.

Then she looked in his eyes. “I promise, no cavorting.”

“Ha!” he blurted out, “deal.”

He took a sip of his drink. It was exquisite. Gino made the best piña coladas in the world as far as Troy was concerned. Fresh coconut cream, pineapple juice straight from the fruit, and one-fifty-one rum for a straight up kick in the pants. *Dang good*.

“Damn, that’s good!” Mindy said.

“Yup,” Troy agreed, “never had better.”

She took another sip and her phone chirped. Looking at the screen she pursed her lips.

“Leave me alone, Taz,” she muttered.

“Taz?”

“My sister’s tennis pro,” she said, “he’s a little weird and totally obsessed with her.”

“Yikes,” Troy said.

“Yeah, I was supposed to have a lesson with him tonight, but then the rain came.” She glanced at her phone. “Now he won’t stop texting me.”

Troy raised his eyebrows as Gino leaned in to check their drinks.

“How is Caroline, by the way?” the bartender asked.

“Caroline?” Troy asked.

“Actually, I haven’t heard from her all day,” she said to Gino.

“My twin sister,” she said and turned to Troy.

“Twin... sisters...?” Troy stumbled over his words.

“Yeah,” she winked at him, “there’s two of me.”

“Check, please,” he joked to Gino.

Mindy laughed and Troy thought it was incredibly infectious.

“Just remember,” she said with a wink, “no cavorting.”

Regrettin’ this already.

Ain't Missin' You

P rivate investigator, Remington Hoyt Reginald, dabbed his upper

lip with a pristine white, monogrammed handkerchief. The lingering taste of his morning mint julep kept his tongue a bit dry and thirsty. His purple ascot was tucked to perfection into his highly-starched, blush-pink Hilditch And Key dress shirt. The cufflinks were in the shape of handcuffs—one cuff on his right sleeve, one cuff on his left—just above the monogram. Salvatore Ferragamo cap toe oxford shoes finished his outfit in splendid burgundy. He looked amazing, if he did say so himself.

All this was likely wasted on his client, Jack Colpiller, who was wearing a white V-neck t-shirt—it looked to be Fruit of the Loom brand—and a pair of light blue swim trunks—at least those were Ralph Lauren. His flip-flops proudly bore no visible logo. Probably bought from one of the ridiculous tourist shops down by South Beach, *Balls* or *Wings* or *Eagles*. *Ugh*, thought Remington, *no accounting for taste*.

“Her mother probably has her brainwashed against me,” Jack said as Remington scribbled in a small moleskin notebook. “After her part of the will too, I’m sure.”

“Mmhmm,” said Remington, who didn’t look up.

“Hell, I just want to know where she is,” he said and threw up his hands. “Damn women.”

“Not to worry, sir.” Remington closed his notebook and slid it into his briefcase. “I’ll let you know before tonight.”

Jack Colpiller stood up and flip-flopped his way over to the massive black grand piano that stood next to the nine-foot high solid glass wall looking out over the beach. He grabbed an envelope from the top of the piano and opened it. He flipped through it and handed it to Remington.

“Your downpayment,” he said to the private investigator, “count it if you like. The rest when she’s back home.”

Remington slid the envelope into his case without opening it. He

hid his disdain for the implication that he would count the money in front of a client—even a client with the status of Colpiller—even if it was seventy-five grand.

If the money was short, he would be issued an invoice for the remainder. He already had an idea that the daughter had, in fact, run off with a boy, or maybe she had run off to her mother. He knew this because he'd located her car near the club district on South Beach. Typical rich bitch-leaving-daddy scenario. All he had to do was get her tag run at Miami P.D., verify her whereabouts, take a few high-resolution photos of her, and the rest of the two-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars would be *briefcased* over to him. All of this was chump change compared to what his other case could lead to, but he hadn't discovered that yet. He had no idea what he was about to get into.

Pushing the elevator button to descend, he put on his most confident smile.

"I'll most likely find her by ten o'clock tonight," he said as the doors slid open and he stepped in.

Jack just nodded and raised his glass. *It looks like whiskey*, thought Remington, *who drinks whiskey this time of the morning... actually, who drinks whiskey at all... ugh?*



TROY BODEAN WOKE up alone in his bed. The sheets were tossed off him and the fan was sitting right next to him, blowing as hard as it could... and he was still sweating. The apartment was provided by Don Henderson's beach services company as part of Troy's employment. It was intended to be shared by two of the company's workers, but when Eduardo got deported, the apartment became Troy's alone. He'd given up a chunk of his pay to keep it that way. Small as it was, with only three rooms—bedroom, bathroom, and combo kitchen, dining, living room—it wasn't half bad. He had a futon in the living room, a twin mattress on the floor of the bedroom, and a plastic chair and TV tray in the dining area of the kitchen. No television, just his phone. But it was good enough for catching up on the Dolphins, and occasionally, the Braves.

The heat was stifling, even at six in the morning. With no air-conditioning and the slatted, jalousie style windows, there was very little air-flow and the ceiling fan had died a few days ago. Thankfully, his next-door neighbor had loaned him a box fan and it did a terrific job of pushing the hot air around the apartment. The good news was it was Monday and he was off work. He thought he might even take a dip in the pool.

The miserable little three-story apartment building he lived in was shaped like a horseshoe. In the center of the horseshoe was a small, oval shaped pool. Because of the shape of the building, it was eternally in the shade—which was nice when it was so dang hot. Troy grabbed his beach towel (a five-finger souvenir he quietly lifted from the Ritz) and walked out his door. The inside of the horseshoe was the walkway connecting all the apartments and various stairwells leading down to the ground floor. Troy's place was right in the center. He looked down the three stories to the pool and saw it was empty except for Auggie.

Auggie was his octogenarian Jewish neighbor. He had retired from a home shopping network ten years ago and used his entire life savings to buy one of the ratty top floor apartments. Naturally, he worked as a Walmart greeter to supplement his Social Security.

Troy padded down the metal stairs and walked toward the pool. He dipped his toe in the water. It was frigid. Auggie was leaning against the shallow end of the pool, arms spread akimbo as if he was basking in a hot top. His body was covered with masses of salt and pepper hair, so much that he looked like he was resting in a sea of aging kelp. Troy shivered internally but smiled on the outside.

"How's it going, Auggie?" he asked the old man.

Auggie didn't open his eyes. He just raised one hand in a hello gesture, and said, "It doesn't go, ya gotta push it."

"That right?" Troy dipped a second toe in the water... it was still freezing.

He was pulling off his shirt to take the plunge, hoping that he would get used to the chilly pool, when his cell phone beeped.

"Dat's gotta be you," Auggie said, "I ain't had one in twenty years."

Troy laughed as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

-Beach in 10?

The number wasn't a contact in his phone. Troy was puzzled by it, but couldn't resist.

-Who is this?

-Oh, c'mon now. You haven't forgotten me already have you?

Troy arched an eyebrow. Before he could type a response, the next message pinged.

-It's Mindy, silly. C'mon down. It's better than your crappy pool I'm sure! LOL

Coupla things, Troy thought, how'd you get my number? And how the hell did you know about my pool?

As if she'd read his mind, her next text spelled it out.

-You're probably wondering how I got your number. Gino gave it to me. And you told me about your place. Probably trying to get me to come home with you. LOL

Oh, dangit. Troy mentally face-palmed himself. *That's not good.*

-I'm kidding, Gino told me where you lived. No biggie, just get ur ass down here. No cavorting, I promise. The beach is awesome today.

He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or not, but he took a look at Auggie drowning in his own body hair and tapped out his reply.

-On my way.

-Good. I need you to put sunscreen on my back.

"Oh hell," Troy mumbled out loud, "no cavortin' indeed.

He pulled himself out of the pool and nodded to Auggie.

"Check you later, Aug," he said.

"Ah, good," the old man smiled. "I could use a check!"

He slipped on his flip flops and headed out the rusty gate.

Senator Gil Dickerson of Florida could feel his smile turning into

a leering ogle as his young intern untied the strings on her bikini top. She handed him a bottle of cocoa-butter, some European crap sunscreen promising the darkest tan money can buy.

“Do my back?” she said, smiling coyly over her bare shoulder.

Gil pointed the bottle at her back and squeezed. It spurted out all over her already dark skin and she giggled at the dirty innuendo.

“Naughty boy,” she said as he rubbed it in.

He applied enough pressure to let her know he got the message she was sending, and that he was more than willing. Sure, he was older by three decades, but when you were famous, none of that mattered. And Gil was in great shape for his age. Standing at almost six-feet two-inches, he was tall enough to appear confident, but not so tall that he appeared overbearing... perfect for a politician. And his salt and pepper hair and beard combined with a slightly olive complexion were enough to garner him a Sean Connery lookalike comparison. And he played it up for all it was worth, even affecting a slightly Scottish brogue.

While attending Harvard Law, he found the actual study and eventual practice of law to be tedious and boring. But he did it well enough to make the Harvard Law Review. At one of the swanky banquets the review was known to host, he shook hands with several influential people. Some of them took notice of his physical, social, and commanding spoken presence in the room. When he spoke, more people listened than didn't. And thus, the grooming began.

It began innocently enough, with speeches at small functions—tests for his crowd appeal—and grew into introductions for higher officials at political rallies. He was ushered along the political path of backroom deals and slightly shady support functions until they were sure they had their boy. And he loved it. Along with the under-the-table support came money, women, and power. Power quickly became his most desired benefit. The women came and went, all in search of a

golden ticket, until Sandra. A staffer in his first campaign, she spent hours working on getting him elected, and though it was only for a small-town Representative's seat, it showed her ability to make Gil into the perfect candidate. At several of his meetings with backers, it became clear that he was going to marry Sandra, whether he wanted to or not. She was going to be part of the package. Every politician needs a First Lady.

Gil didn't mind; he and Sandra had enough in common that they enjoyed each other's company. They had sex, but it was forced and dull. He was careful to conceal the fact that he was uninterested... so as not to hurt her feelings. Some of his colleagues began to suggest that he find enjoyment elsewhere and laughed when he asked what they meant by that.

"Staffers, man," said James Hardy, Senator from Vermont, "why the hell you think they're all sweet young college girls?"

The others in the room slapped each other on the back and plenty of winks and nudges went around the group. It wasn't long before Gil was personally selecting his interns... just for such purposes. He got good at spotting the girls who knew what they were there for, and had them in bed after a few trinkets and gifts. He felt confident that Sandra never knew about any of it, and even if she did, she knew enough to keep her mouth shut.

On the night they celebrated the start of his campaign for Governor of Florida, he was presented with a piece of paper rolled up like a scroll with a red ribbon tied around it.

"What's this?" he asked, feeling the corners of his mouth turning up into a grin.

"We got ya a little something special," said Harry Turnbull, Senator of Maine, and winked at him and smacked his back a few times. "Enjoy, Senator Dickerson. And I'll be appreciating your vote item numba one-fifty-three."

Gil laughed as he untied the ribbon. "You had me at *something special*."

The paper curled open and he could see it was a resume. He held it up and shrugged his shoulders.

"What the hell am I sh'posed to do with thish?" he said in his best Connery accent.

James Hardy grabbed his elbow and squeezed it, bobbing his eyebrows up and down. "Whatevah the hell you wanna do, Senator."

The others in the room all broke into raucous laughter. The intern whose resume he held was hired the next Monday, and their sexual interludes started on Tuesday. Sometimes they'd jump into a closet, sometimes an elevator, and often, his car in the parking garage. He was actually surprised that they'd never gotten caught. It wasn't until

they'd been romping for six months that she started to ask him to take her away on weekend trips. And that's how they ended up sitting on the Senator's boat at Canal Point on Lake Okeechobee at another Senator's private lake house with barely any clothes on.

There weren't enough people here to worry about being recognized. It was just an old man out with his daughter on a lake trip... or so Gil tried to portray. But if anyone had seen him smearing sunscreen all over her bare back, they would've thought it was an odd relationship at best, incest at worst. When he was through, she turned around, her top falling away completely.

"Oops!" she said, feigning embarrassment and barely covering her breasts.

He squirted more sunscreen into his palm. "Young lady, you're gonna get an awful sunburn if I don't put some of this on your chest as well."

She grinned and played along, dropping her arms. She was exquisite. Perfect fake boobs and a flat stomach covered with a very slight sheen of sweat. He knew what was going to happen next. As he lurched toward her with his creamy hands, she said the first terrible thing he'd ever heard from her.

"So," she started casually, "when you gonna be honest with yourself and get rid of that old hag you been bangin' for the last twenty years?"

The comment struck him as rude and crass, and he backhanded her hard... too hard. Say what you would about him, but Sandra was as pure a soul as there ever was... no one was allowed to speak ill of her when he was listening. The intern screamed and turned back toward him. Her jaw was clearly broken and slightly caved in. Blood gushed from her mouth and she spit out two teeth.

"You bagghstardddd!" she gurgled, as if her mouth was full of marbles.

Gil was shocked. He hadn't meant to hit her so hard.

"Oh my God, Sandy, I mean, um..." he couldn't remember her name.

"Ith Jackie, you pieth of thit!" She reached across the boat to grab her phone out of a nearby towel. "I'm goirng to end you!"

She started punching in a number that only had three digits; nine-one-one. Gil sat paralyzed. How would this play out? Would it make the papers? Would Sandra leave him? Shit, his campaign was just getting started. The scandal would be the end of it and the end of his political career.

He leapt toward her and punched her in the face. Her phone jumped out of her hand and plopped into the lake as the scream burbled out of her mouth. The shock was replaced with terror as she

suddenly realized she was in mortal danger.

Gil grabbed her towel and forced it into her face. He dragged her down into the floor of the boat and held it there until she stopped breathing. He let go of the towel and scrambled back to the back of the boat. He drove out to what felt like the center of the lake, wrapped the boat's anchor around her ankles, and tossed her along with her belongings into the water. Panting for air, he raced away from the scene. He parked the boat, got into his car, and sped away without looking back. He made his own call to someone he felt he could trust to help him deal with the situation, Senator James Hardy—the owner of the boat.

He felt tears forming in his eyes as he breathlessly told the story.

“Shut up!” Hardy said as he got to the gory details. “Just shut up and get your ass home. We don’t need to discuss this over a cell connection. Get home, sleep with your wife, and call me in the morning.”

He ended the call and drove as fast as he could manage back to his condo in Brickell. He explained to his wife that the filibuster he’d claimed was keeping him away that weekend had ended earlier than expected. She kissed him on the cheek and had the chef make him dinner... the perfect First Lady.



PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR, Remington Hoyt Reginald, sat in his car with his ridiculously long telephoto lens in shock at what he’d witnessed. Senator Gil Dickerson had been having an affair with Jackie Ranchero-Doral, that was common knowledge around D.C. What wasn’t known to anyone around the senator was that Jackie flew home every weekend to her husband. Said husband had become suspicious of Jackie’s more and more frequent weekends spent with the good senator, and had hired Remington to find out what was really going down.

It had been a typical *shoot some eight-by-ten glossy photos of the adulterous couple having a tryst, show the shocked spouse the damning evidence, collect the payment, shake hands and walk away* kind of case... until Remington had watched Dickerson take the girl out on the boat, stay gone for an hour, then come back without her in a rush that said, *I’m guilty as hell*. But guilty of what? Had he dropped the girl off at another dock? Had she run away? Had he... murdered her and dropped her body in the water? Remington got out of his car and strolled casually over to the boat. He glanced around the marina like a tourist on holiday. God knows he looked like one, dressed in a cheesy beach shop t-shirt that said *Lake Okeechobee Reel Legends* with a

picture of a large mouth bass on it, garish drug-store bought flip flops, and a pair of khaki shorts with cargo pockets... ugh, cargo pockets, for Christ's sake. Who wore this crap? He promised himself he'd change into his Ralph Lauren outfit of desert-red, seersucker light spring cashmere sweater with horizontal navy stripes, and Bardene burlap slip-on sneakers, as soon as he hit the first gas station.

He peered over the edge of the boat and didn't need to look hard to see the blood all over the seats in the back. With a closer look, he spotted what he thought might be... a couple of broken teeth. *Jesus, Gil*, he thought, *what have you done?* Checking to be sure no one was watching him, he stepped down into the boat, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and scooped up the two teeth. He also soaked the corner of the cloth in congealed blood in case he'd need a D.N.A. sample later.

Slumping back into his rental car, he took a Ziploc bag from his duffle and slid the handkerchief and teeth into it. Slowly, his shock at what had seemingly happened started to form into a plan. As he drove south on I-27, he began to realize just how much power he'd just been given over the senator, likely soon-to-be governor, of the state of Florida. He used the drive to organize his thoughts and how he would present the proposition to Gil Dickerson. He made a mental note to Google the cabinet positions a governor would need to fill once he took office. His gram would be so proud. Tears formed in his eyes as he thought of her.

So proud, indeed.

Coronas With Orange

Troy Clint Bodean flip-flopped his way down Sunrise Drive

toward the ocean with a stolen white Ritz-Carlton towel slung over his shoulder. He was glad of the shade provided by his Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy hat 'cause it was hot... dang hot.

When his toes hit the sparkling white sand, he hopped gingerly from one foot to the other. The heat was burning his feet as he looked left and right down the beach for Mindy. His eyes finally lit on her, waving him over.

Good gawd, he thought, careful not to let his tongue fall out of his mouth. Mindy Colpiller was wearing a tiny, but not distasteful bikini top, with some sort of paisley pattern and rope-like lace layered on top. Her Daisy Duke denim shorts were unbuttoned at the waist revealing a coordinating solid bikini bottom beneath her belly button. As he got closer to the two beach chairs she'd reserved for them, he was glad he had on his Costa Del Mar Pescador sunglasses to hide his wandering gaze. She was barely halfway through her twenties and had the body to match her age.

No cavortin', he thought to himself as he smiled.

"So, you wear your khakis to swim in?" She arched an eyebrow and grinned.

He looked down at his shorts. Columbia PFG Half Moon shorts, a light khaki color that leaned toward olive green, complete with black canvas belt.

"They're actually fishin' shorts," he said and tapped one of the side pockets, "waterproof, plenty of pouches, good for holding line and bait and such."

She nodded and then shook her head. "Maybe I can show you something more... updated? So, you won't look so out of place down here."

Troy looked around. Just a few feet from them sat a man who reminded him of Auggie. Older, bulging stomach, hairy back, sagging everything, and all squeezed into tiny neon green Speedos like a

popped can of biscuits.

"No thanks, darlin'," he said and plopped down onto the chair next to her.

She followed his gaze to the man and laughed. "Not like that, silly! Something tasteful and modern—no cargo pockets."

"That's okay," he said, tipping his straw cowboy hat at her, "I like my style just the way it is."

Her smile relaxed. "As you should, Troy. It's a good style."

"Thank ya, darlin'," he said reclining back on the chair. "So what's on the agenda this afternoon?"

"I'm thinking about ordering a drink," —she jutted her chin toward a man walking up the beach with a tray, a waiter from the Ritz-Carlto— "though I'm still feeling those Pina Coladas from last night. How about you?"

"Hmmm, hair of the dog, eh?" Troy scratched his beard. "Yeah, why not. I'll have a beer."

Mindy stopped the waiter, ordered two Red Stripes with an orange slice, and then slid her denim shorts off. She stood and walked a couple of steps backward toward the ocean.

"You coming in?" she asked.

"Nah," Troy said, "I get enough of that at work. I'm just gonna kick back right here and wait for that beer if it's all the same to you."

"Sure thing, cowboy," she said, winked, and turned around.

"Good Gawd," he muttered aloud this time.

"I heard that," she called without looking back.

Troy tipped his hat forward to block his gaze but was only partially successful as he could still see a little of her through the straw... but only a little. He dozed off in the heat and dreamt of shipwrecks and gold... or maybe it wasn't a dream, but a memory. He wasn't sure.



HE WOKE to the sound of two bottles clinking together and the sight of Mindy holding out a Red Stripe toward him. Stretching his arms up and groaning as he popped and cracked, he reached for the beer. It was ice cold. He took a long sip and sat all the way up.

"Why Red Stripe?" he asked. "I mean, I don't mind, it's just not my first choice." He put the bottle to his lips.

"Reminds me of my honeymoon in Jamaica," she said.

He spewed beer out of his mouth. "Your honeymoon??"

"Haha, easy big guy." She held up a hand. "It didn't work out. We were too young and within a week it was annulled."

Troy wiped his dripping mouth with the back of his hand.

"But when we were there," she continued, "I had my first Red Stripe ever. And for the entire awkward, argument-filled week, that's all I drank... along with the occasional mojito."

Troy sniffed and took another drink.

"All we did for the entire honeymoon was fight and drink. Good times, eh?"

He heard a tinge of sadness in her voice and wondered if she'd wanted it to end, or if it had been her ex-fiancé or ex-husband or whatever he'd be called after an annulment.

"Well," he said, holding out his beer bottle, "here's to the future."

She smiled and clinked her bottle against his. A chirp came from her bag and she jumped at it frantically. Troy was taken aback for a second as she dug through the contents. Pulling out her phone, she clicked it and then frowned.

"Ugh, geez." She tossed it back into the bag. "Taz again."

"What's wrong with that dude?" Troy sipped the last of his beer.

"He's just annoying is all." She shrugged her shoulders. "I was hoping it was Caroline. I still haven't heard from her and I'm starting to get worried."

"Have you called the police?"

Mindy inhaled. "No, not yet. She's done this kind of thing before... disappear for a couple of days and then come back saying she'd been in the mountains for a weekend or on a cruise or something."

Troy considered that for a second. "Who was the last person to see her or talk to her?"

"Taz, I think."

Mindy's eyes went wide as something seemed to click into place in her mind.

"You don't think he would do anything... bad... to her?" Troy asked, "I mean, not like really bad... but..."

"I don't think so." Mindy shook her head. "She's been taking tennis lessons from him since we were in high school. He adores her."

Troy spotted the waiter and raised his hand. "That's what I'm afraid of... you need another?"

"Sure," she said and gulped the last of her beer, "but let's get something else. I've had it with Red Stripe."

"Coronas, my man," —Troy held up two fingers— "with orange slices."

"Orange slices?" she asked.

Troy grinned. "Giving you a new memory to chase off the old ones."

"Sounds good," she agreed, and winked at him.

No cavortin', Troy thought to himself.

"And I really think you oughta call the police, or at least have your

dad call," he said, "just to put 'em on alert. Might be nothin', but my sixth sense is tellin' me to watch this fella, Taz."

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed, looking over his shoulder.

He threw himself in front of her, shielding her from whatever horror she had seen. It was an old instinct from his time back in Afghanistan. He sometimes wished he could've done something to shield old Harry Nedman from the I.E.D. that killed him.

"What is it?" he demanded, ready to take action.

"That man and woman over there." She didn't seem to take offense that Troy was now basically laying on top of her. "She's washing his feet with bottled water and clipping his toenails."

Troy spotted the couple. Uber blonde hair, tan skin with a yellow tone, and somehow very European looking features. The woman was indeed scrubbing the man's feet, and intermittently, she would clip one of his toenails with a pair of chrome clippers.

"Now that's gross." Troy looked back at Mindy and realized he was leaning on her. He didn't move immediately, and neither did she...

"Okay, here we go," the waiter interrupted, and Troy jumped back over to his own beach chair, "two Coronas with orange. And how should I charge this?"

Mindy reached for the beers and handed one to Troy. "On my account, thank you."

The waiter nodded. "Very good, Ms. Colpiller."

"Here's to new memories." She held out her beer toward Troy and they clinked them again.

Rally Rally Rally

Senator Gil Dickerson waved to the crowd and fought off the urge

to wipe the sweat trickling down from his forehead. *Never let 'em see you sweat*, he thought, *but goddamn this Florida heat*.

As he read the super-scripted, poll-tested, generic crap written by the best speech writer in Florida teleprompter bull, he saw the faces in the crowd looking up at him in admiration. He'd always had this effect on people. From his days back at Harvard, he remembered commanding every room he'd ever walked into, and it was no different now. He finished his speech to thunderous applause as Sandy joined him on stage. She was dressed tastefully in a style that recalled Jackie O, as every first lady had worn since the days of Camelot. Barely looking at him, she put on her most photogenic smile, lightly holding his left elbow. He saw women in the throng of rally-goers staring at her with tears forming in their eyes—she would be key in securing the votes of mothers, wives, and daughters against his opponent, Anna Martinez.

Stepping down from the stage, she still had him by the elbow and finally looked him in the eye.

“Honey,” —she still had a slight Georgia drawl— “you okay? You seem distant.”

He faked a calm and quiet smile. “I am, dear. Just worked up about this whole damn thing.”

A gang of men in suits gathered around them, some of them secret service with dark glasses and ear microphones, some of them senators and local public officials trying to grab his attention for a smile and a handshake. Dogs, just a pack of dogs that smell an alpha getting ready to take the lead.

“Well, hello theyah, Sandy,” said Senator James Hardy as he pushed to the front of the fray and took her hand gently. He kissed her on one cheek then the other. “I am so glad you could come down and see our boy takin’ charge of this campaign today,” he said, grinning.

“Why, thank you, James.” She smiled without using her eyes. “Just

doing my part.”

“Dear,” —Gil looked at her and put his hands on her shoulders—
“You know I couldn’t do this without you, right?”

She tilted her head to the side and smiled, this time with her eyes.

“Yes, honey,” she said, motioning to James and the gaggle of suits,
“come home to me later after you and your boys have your fun.”

James smiled and clapped a hand on Gil’s shoulders. “We just need
a few minutes to go over the poll numbers and the next stop. We’ll
have him home before ten.”

She started to say something, but she was whisked away by their
driver. Gil watched as she waved over the crowd.

“Got yourself a good woman theyah.” James urged Gil away from
the throng and toward a separate car. “We need to protect her from...
all that’s goin’ on.”

They ducked into the car. When the door closed, James poured
two bourbons with ice and handed one to Gil.

“Protect her?” Gil asked. “Shit, we gotta protect *me*, don’t we?”

James sipped his drink. “Now, don’t you worry about anything,
Gil. I’ve had that boat steam cleaned and put in dry dock. She won’t
see the light of day until after you take office.”

“Dammit, James.” Gil shook his hand sloshing liquid onto the
floorboard. “I just murdered an intern for Christ sake!”

James threw a quick look at the driver and then whispered harshly
to Gil. “Now, you just shut the hell up. You hear me? She was a damn
flooze anyhow, and nobody will even notice she’s gone. It’s all been
taken care of and you need to put that all behind you, Governor.”

“Senator,” Gil corrected him.

James pulled a sheet of paper out of his suit pocket. He handed it
to Gil. “If these kinds of numbers keep up,” he said, snapping a finger
on the page, “theyah ain’t no stoppin’ you from taking over the
Governor’s mansion, my boy.”

“Geezus,” Gil said and looked up from the paper, “are these right?”

“Best numbers in the biz.” James sat back in his seat. “IBD/TIPP,
Rasmussen... hell, you even got the local papers calling you Governor-
elect already.”

Gil handed the sheet back to James. “Are you sure this...
business... with the girl is—”

“Done, through, caput, finished.”

“God.” Gil inhaled deeply. “That was a bad thing.”

The car pulled through the toll gate at Key Biscayne without
slowing down—a perk of being a public official in Florida. As they
eased into the parking lot of the Grand Bay Resort, the current staging
location of the campaign, a light drizzle began to ping the windshield.

“Come in for a drink?” James asked as he stepped out.

“Not tonight,” Gil said and waved him off, “Sandy’s waiting for me and I need to be home.”

“Hell, just one drink.” James looked at his ridiculously garish Rolex. “It’s only eight-thirty.”

“Ah, hell,” Gil said after a minute, “I guess it won’t hurt anything to have just one.”

“That’s the spirit old boy.” James helped him out of the car. “Besides, you’ll have plenty of time to spend with her when you move into that mansion on the hill, Governor.”

“I suppose I will.” Gil smiled and closed the door.

“Today, it’s Governor’s Mansion of Florida,” James Hardy said as he slapped him on the back, “and tomorrow, the White House.”

Gil laughed. He hadn’t given that much thought... but why not? *Hell, a lot of presidents had won elections by carrying Florida.* He breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe this dreadful business with the intern really would go away forever.



REMINGTON HOYT REGINALD drummed his fingers on his steering wheel sitting outside the one star rated Food Spot gas station on NW 154th street in Hialeah. He was charged up. He had just come from dropping the evidence off at the crime lab, and though he knew what the results of the tests would show, the excitement of waiting had his leg bouncing up and down wildly. The girl at the lab had said the nature of his evidence, inferring a homicide as it did, would push his blood and teeth samples to the top of the list. They would have something for him in two hours or less.

Rather than drive back to his less-than-posh accommodations in Liberty Square, he’d decided to wait it out near the lab. Fifteen minutes had passed and he couldn’t take it anymore... he’d need a diversion.

He watched the various customers of the Food Spot go in and out like ants. Some looked as if they might be homeless and in search of cool air conditioning, others looked like tourists on the way to Miami who’d taken a wrong turn, and almost all came out of the store with an alcoholic beverage of some sort stashed in a brown paper sack. None came out with any of the tubular, mystery ingredient, rotated-on-a-hot-dog-roller food. Remington waited for the store to empty and whisked inside. He knew what he was here for and didn’t want any lookie-loos around watching him make his purchase.

He walked as nonchalantly as he could through the store, picking up the items he needed as if he just happened to see them on the shelf.

Two packages of Mike and Ike candy, a single of the new limited

release Zima, and a giant hot dog from the aforementioned heat rollers with mustard, ketchup, relish and chili. He sauntered up to the counter with a relaxed smile and placed his items carefully on the counter in order, from cheapest to most expensive. The Hispanic clerk looked as if he'd just come in from working on his car. His wife-beater tank was exposed behind a coral, short-sleeved linen shirt. The man was young, perhaps twenty-five, and muscled just enough to show he worked out, but not enough to take the stage at the Arnold Schwarzenegger International. Remington felt his pulse quicken.

He let his eyes wander up to the magazines stashed out of the purview of children and found what he wanted... he waited until the clerk was on the last item and spoke while he flipped through his wallet. "Oh, and... one of those too, please." Remington felt his lips go dry as he pointed.

The clerk looked up at the dirty magazines, scanning across the lurid assortment. "Deez one?"

Remington didn't look up. "Mmhmm, yeah, sure."

The clerk shoved it into the paper sack and ticked out the total on the register.

"Thirteen dollars and thirty-five cents."

Remington froze. Something was wrong. He always came here, he always got the same thing, and the total was always thirteen dollars and *twenty-five* cents. This wasn't good... he always paid in cash, to make sure there was no trail of his... purchases.

"I don't think that's right," he stammered, "can you check it again?"

The man tapped the keyboard a couple of times. "Ees right, señor. The owner raised zee price on zee hot dogs last week."

Remington stared at the exact change he'd placed in his wallet for this purchase. He eyed his debit card but decided against it—too much of a trail. He twirled his fingers in the penny cup by the register; four pennies. He was still six cents short.

Dammit, he thought, *maybe some change in the rental car.*

"I'll be right back," he said to the clerk and turned toward the door.

A young man dressed from head to toe in white was standing at the door. *Shit*. Remington put his head down and bumped past the kid.

"Well, g'day ta you too, mate," he blurted as Remington's shirt pulled on something as he brushed him.

The kid let go of the door and entered the store in a huff. Remington's eye caught the something that had fallen from the guy's shirt and clicked on the ground. It was a name tag, from the Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden on Key Biscayne, with the name *Adrian "Taz" Hull* printed on it. Now that was some interesting kismet. What the

heck was... Taz... doing out here in Hialeah? He tucked the name tag into his pocket and hurried to his car.



TAZ BRUSHED past the creepy dude at the door and wandered into the store. He had the munchies something fierce, which was normal, considering he'd just smoked the better part of a blunt with his buddy, Eduardo. He'd never smoked before coming to the states but was quickly introduced to the pastime by his local Miami buddies. He grabbed a full-sized bag of Bugles and a two-liter bottle of orange Fanta. He walked up to the counter, plopped the chips down, and started counting out pennies. As he counted, he noticed a bag next to the register with a magazine poking out the top. It read *French Kittens* across the top. *Freaky-deeky*, thought Taz, *this guy's a real creep show*. He looked out the window and saw the guy rummaging around in his car. On the front bumper was a plate that said *Biscayne Chariots*. *Odd, the dude has a rental car from Key Biscayne?* Taz shrugged it off.

"Probably a damn tourist," he muttered as he paid for his drink and chips.

"Nah, man," the clerk startled him, "he's been around before. Always buys zee same weird shit."

Taz looked back at the man, who was now staring at him through the hazy storefront door.

"Fookin' weirdo." Taz looked away.

He grabbed his stuff and hurried out the store. He didn't like being stared at by some freak of nature. He was sure to keep his eyes down and not make any more eye contact with the man. He stumbled onto his bike and started the long ride back to the island.



SURE ENOUGH, Remington found a quarter in the cup holder. He waited in the car until Taz had completed his purchase. *Shit, shit, shit*. The dude just looked right at him. He quickly looked away and pretended to play with the radio. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched him climb onto a bike that had been leaning outside the door. He hurried back into the Food Spot and tossed the quarter on the counter and grabbed his sack. The clerk started digging in his register for the change.

"Keep it," Remington said and practically dove for his car.

He turned the key and cranked the engine. He flung the A/C knob all the way over; he was suddenly sweating bullets. Sticking out the top of the bag was his magazine. He felt the sudden urge to toss it out,

but stopped himself.

“Ugh,” he muttered, putting his car into reverse. “Gram would be so disappointed.”

Being careful to travel in the opposite direction than the kid from the store, he pulled into traffic and looked for another place to stop and... take care of business. He glanced at his watch. Still had over an hour to burn before the lab would have anything.

Daddy Dearest

Mindy Colpiller sat at the massive grand piano tapping out the

notes to chopsticks while her father, Jack Colpiller, spoke into his phone to the island police department. His voice was agitated, but not nearly agitated enough. His daughter was missing for Christ's sake... *didn't he care?* She could feel the buzz wearing off from the couple—or was it three?—Red Stripes with Troy on the beach. Any other time she would've been buzzing with the excitement of meeting an interesting man like Troy, but she still hadn't heard from Caroline and it was approaching two days now. She had come in and demanded that her dad call the police.

After reluctantly telling her he had a private investigator on it and that they should have some answers soon, he agreed to get the cops involved as long as he could keep the P.I. on the case too.

"That's fine, Daddy," Mindy said, "do whatever you want, but we need to find Caroline!"

Jack Colpiller poured what might've been his third bourbon and swirled it around his crystal highball glass.

"Ah, hell, honey," he said, and shrugged his shoulders and took a sip, "she's probably off on some damn granola-munching road trip to drop acid and listen to a music festival in the mud."

Mindy glared at him. "She doesn't do that anymore, Daddy. Not since she got rid of Chester... or whatever that dude's name was."

"Well, hell," he said and threw his arm up to the side, "if we don't even know who her current man is, how in the world could we know where she might be?"

Mindy thought for a second; her dad did have a point. Maybe Caroline was off on a joy ride somewhere. No, that didn't make sense. She'd been trying to text and call for the last two days, and got no texts back and her calls went straight to voicemail. Her phone was either off or dead, one of the two.

As if he was reading her mind, her dad said, "Remington tried to track the G.P.S. on her phone and got nothing. It must have died, and

she's out at Bonnaroo with no way to charge it or something. He'll find her though. He's the best in the business."

"Remington?" She arched an eyebrow.

"The P.I." he answered.

"I know that, but... Remington? As in Steele?"

"Remington Hoyt Reginald," he said, "best in the biz. Does a lot of work for the office."

"Right."

Jack set his glass down and sat beside Mindy on the piano bench. He wrapped his arm around her and tapped a key.

"Look, sweetie," he said, "your sister's going to be just fine. I have the best man in the business on her trail. She's only been gone since... what... Friday night at, I don't know, maybe six or seven o' clock? So, it's barely been two days."

Mindy nodded her head. An awkward silence fell between them.

"Have you called mom?"

Jack Colpiller inhaled, stood, and walked to the bar to fill his glass to the top with more bourbon.

"I left a message at her office," —he gulped his drink— "and told them it was an emergency. They said she told them I would say that."

"Ugh," Mindy said, "what a bitch."

"Now, honey—" Jack started.

Mindy's cell phone chirped and she jumped, frantically clicking it on.

"Caroline?" her father asked.

She shook her head. "No, it's Taz."

"Taz?"

"Her tennis pro, Daddy." Mindy rolled her eyes. "Don't you know anything about your daughter at all?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "Mindy, you know she does her own thing. I just pay the bills."

She shoved her phone into her back pocket.

"Well, aren't you going to answer him?" Jack asked. "Why's he calling you?"

"I do tennis lessons with him sometimes," Mindy answered, "but he's annoying as hell. He hasn't stopped calling me since Saturday morning after..."

Her voice trailed off. Something Troy had said drifted back into her mind. Taz was the last person to see Caroline before she went missing.

"Daddy," she blinked, "I think maybe Remington Steele should talk to Taz."

"It's Remington Hoyt Reginald, honey."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," she said, "but Taz may know something."

She might've told him where she was going or whatever."

She didn't say that Taz might've actually done something to her twin sister... something awful. She shivered at the thought.

"Okay, honey," Jack said, frowning his brow, "I'll call him in the morning."

Her phone chirped again. She pulled it out of her pocket. "What now, Taz? Geez!"

The text wasn't from Taz though, it was from Troy. Despite everything, she felt her heart flip. It was that buzz, that exhilaration, that thrill of excitement that came from meeting a new boy. But, God, this was no boy. Troy was a man. A beautiful, dark-haired, blue-eyed, strong—

"Hun?" her dad interrupted her thought. "Everything okay?"

"Yes, Daddy." She jumped up from the piano and pecked him on the cheek. "I'm gonna head to bed."

She skipped off to her room, leaving him standing alone.

He looked down at his watch.

"But it's only eight o'clock," he called out to no one.



"OH, DEAR GOD, PLEASE KILL ME," groaned Remington Hoyt Reginald.

His stomach growled and bubbled. Pain shot from his throat all the way down to his colon. He'd just picked up his evidence reports from the lab and was headed home. Traffic was at a standstill on the 112. There had been a massive accident on the Dolphin Expressway, and all the traffic heading into and out of the Miami International Airport had been rerouted. It felt like it had all been rerouted in front of him. And of all times to experience serious intestinal distress...

"And to think," —he cranked the air conditioning as high as it would go— "I paid extra for that damn hot dog."

His stomach lurched violently, causing him to squeeze his butt cheeks together as hard as he could.

"Oh, sweet Jesus." He rocked back and forth, breathing as slowly as he could.

I'm going to shit my pants, he thought.

"Damn you, Food Spot!" he yelled, making his stomach lurch again... this time lower in his belly.

That hot dog was trying its hardest to escape. Remington had already rolled down the window to vomit once and the streaks of goo were crusting on the outside of the car. Sweat trickled down his forehead. The car in front of him eased forward and teased him that they might be moving a little faster again, but suddenly, it broke hard. He slammed on his brakes and the pressure from leaning into the

seatbelt caused him to retch. He jerked his hand down for the window control, but he missed and got the rear window down just in time for him to vomit all on the inside of the driver door.

“Dammit!” he yelled, causing his bowels to threaten to empty.

He looked over at his bag from the Food Spot, searching for something to save him. His French Kittens magazine was peeking out of the top of the bag. A tiny seep of putrid air escaped his clenched buttocks and he knew what was coming next. The pain was so intense that he wasn’t sure if he could do what he was planning without making an awful mess of himself.

He slowly opened his door as vomit dripped down onto the pavement. He eased his legs over the sill of the door, careful not to separate the cheeks. Unbuckling his belt, he began to shimmy his hideous cargo shorts down on his thighs out the door. Truth be known, he didn’t care if they did get crap all over them, but he didn’t have anything else to wear in the meantime. He’d picked a really bad day to go commando.

Another sharp pain, and he was standing in the road, horns blaring all around him in the traffic jam, half exposed to God and everybody, holding a French Kittens porno and with gunk and vomit all over his hand.

He crouched, and let go, and felt blessed relief as his bowels spurted all over the road. The driver behind him was suddenly aghast at the scene, struggling to cover the eyes of the child in the back seat. Remington didn’t care. All he knew was that the liquid lava in his stomach was coming out... and coming out... and coming out. Good grief, it was only one hot dog. Why was there so much?

He didn’t care. It felt sooooo good to let it go. When he was finally certain he was finished, he wiped his soiled bottom with the fetish porn magazine and shoved it under his car. Pulling up his pants and waving apologies to the driver behind him, he slid back into the car.

The cool air conditioning was amazing. He breathed out as traffic began to move faster.

“Thank you, Jesus,” he wheezed.

The inside of the car smelled awful, so he rode with the windows down. Thank the Lord and Gram he’d splurged on the rental car insurance.

That’s when his phone dinged. New voicemail. He recognized the number and clicked to listen to the message.

“Remi,” the message started.

His hackles rose. Remi was a shortened version of his name that he despised. His Gram called him Remi and she was the *only* person allowed to call him that.

“Jack Colpillar here,” it continued, “pertaining to my daughter’s

disappearance. It has come to my attention that you may want to check out a fella named Taz or Tazzie. He's a pro down at the Ritz's tennis center. Okay, well, I know you're busy and all, but update me when you can."

Remington's memory tickled at the mention of the name. Taz? He'd seen that somewhere... The name tag. He tucked his hand into his pocket and pulled out the tag he'd picked up after that kid had so rudely bumped into him at the Food Spot.

Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden

Adrian "Taz" Hull.

He made a mental note to run some background on this guy. As he took the exit toward his apartment in Liberty Square, his phone made another sound. Text tone. Looking at the screen, he read:

-Got a line on that plate you had me run

It was from Ted, his buddy at the Miami P.D.

-Email it to me

-10-4

Nice, Remington thought, I'll have this Colpiller deal wrapped up by tomorrow and be able to spend some quality time dealing with Senator Dickerson. He wondered if he should get a few new suits... maybe a little more conservative for his soon-to-come foray into politics. He looked down at his current crap and vomit-stained outfit. *God, anything would be better than this.* He pulled up next to the dumpster at his apartment complex. He stripped naked and threw all of the clothes in and hopped back into his car. A super-hot shower and a quick bite and then he'd organize all his new information from today.

And then, he'd have a short visit with Gram.

Follow Me

Troy Clint Bodean answered his phone, though against his better judgment. It was Mindy Colpiller. They'd texted back and forth last night for two hours and he'd successfully dodged any attempts to get him to meet her out. He was feeling a particularly strong urge to nip this whole thing in the bud.

"Please, Troy," she started abruptly, "I need your help to find Caroline. She's still gone and I think something is wrong."

"Darlin'," he protested, "the police and your daddy should be enough to get her back. I don't have a clue what's happened to her, but I'm sure she'll be alright."

"Ugh," she groaned, "but daddy doesn't know what I know."

Troy stopped short. *Dangit, this was gettin' to sound so familiar.* He stood his ground.

"I'm tellin' ya," he said, "there's not a thing I can do about it. Let the police do their job. Besides, I gotta get to work at two o'clock."

"Just meet me at Gino's for lunch," she said quickly, "I gotta go."

He heard her voice in the distance as she hung up the phone. "Hi Daddy..."

Sitting on the edge of his bed, he inhaled deeply. *Well, dang, here we go again,* he thought. He slipped on a linen shirt, stuck his hat on his head, tapped his pocket to make sure his keys were still there, and walked out the door.

The sun was hot, making the pavement shimmer with heat waves; the sand at work would be glittering white lava. *Fannnnntastic*, Troy thought as he walked along, hopping beneath one shadowy tree to another. He edged his way through the gate up to the Sonesta and inhaled deeply as the icy air conditioning blasted him in the face as he walked into the lobby. He slowed his pace to soak up the chilly air.

Pushing open the back door of the hotel's tiled hallway, the heat hit him again like a full body hair dryer. Mindy Colpiller was sitting at the bar and twirling a straw around a glass of bubbling club soda. A plate with a sandwich without so much as a single bite taken out of it

sat in front of her attracting a single fly. She didn't bother to swat it away. Troy could see that her mood had swung drastically south from the fun they'd had at the beach and the flirtatious chatting they'd done last night.

"Hey," he said softly as he slid onto the stool next to her.

"Hey." She looked up, and the corners of her mouth perked up slightly and then fell back down again.

"You okay?"

"Not really." She traced the straw around her glass again. "Something's wrong. I can feel it."

"But Mindy—" he started.

"No, it's different," she interrupted him, "she's my twin and I can usually feel a connection with her, even if we're far apart. But now... I don't feel anything."

Troy thought about this for a second. He'd had that feeling about his brother, Ryan Bodean, when he'd come back from Afghanistan, but it turned out that he was just fine.

"I think that's jus' your mind playin' tricks on you," he said, "happens to siblings all the time."

"But we're twins," she protested, "it's different. Something bad has happened."

Troy turned and raised his hand. "Gino, can I get a—"

The bartender turned around. A moment of shock grabbed Troy. It wasn't Gino. This was the first time he'd ever been to Sonesta and had a different bartender. This guy was dull and gray. His eyes were empty, and Troy got the feeling it was not his choice to be out here.

"Sorry, um..." Troy glanced at his nametag, "Bill. Can I get a water?"

"Comin' right up, boss."

He turned back to Mindy. "Did you tell your dad? Is he going to have the police check out that tennis guy?"

"Not exactly." She took a small sip of her drink. "He's got a private investigator checking it out. Creepy dude if you ask me."

"Private investigator?"

"Yeah."

Troy nodded. "Okay, well, that's good. Maybe he can find her faster than the police. Sometimes they can't devote much time to a missing person case that isn't very old yet."

"Troy," she said and shrugged her shoulders, "we're going on three days now and I haven't heard a peep. Her phone goes straight to voicemail. If I know anything about my sister, it's that her phone wouldn't be off for three days straight."

"Hey now," —Troy held up his hands— "I'm just tryin' to be positive. Heck, she might be in the mountains camping and not have a

signal or somethin’.”

She considered this and inhaled deeply. “I guess so, but it’s still not like her to be off the grid for this long.”

A long silence settled between them. Troy glanced at the clock over the bar. She noticed his look and slid her plate over in front of him.

“Here, eat this,” she said, “I can’t.”

“You sure?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks,” he said, picking up the sandwich.

“So,” she started, “I think I’m gonna schedule a tennis lesson with Taz.”

Troy coughed, choking on the bite of food in his mouth. “What?”

“I’m going to hit with Taz.”

“Darlin’,” Troy said, then wiped his mouth and shook his head, “that ain’t a good idea at all. What if this dude had something to do with... whatever happened to Caroline?”

“Well,” she said, standing up, “I’m going to ask him. Don’t worry, I’ll do it during the day with plenty of people around. He’s harmless, just a creeper.”

“No, you shouldn’t do this.”

“I don’t have a choice,” she said as tears welled in her eyes. “Daddy won’t do anything to help, and now you won’t do anything to help either. I have to do this all by myself.”

She turned and started walking away.

Troy stood up. “Now, hold on just a minute.” He shoved the stool under the bar and walked after her. He touched her shoulder, and she stopped.

“This is dangerous business you’re gettin’ into,” he said. “If you’re gonna do this, I’m gonna help.”

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you, Troy.”

He glanced down at his watch. “I gotta go to work now, but I’ll be done by seven. Can you wait until then?”

She nodded.

“Okay, good. He took a deep breath. “Then I’ll call you when I get off work and we’ll figure out what we want to do.”

“Perfect,” she said, kissed him on the cheek, and walked away.

Troy watched her go and wondered how in the world he’d gotten roped into this.

“You done with this?” Bill called from the bar and tilting the plate toward him.

“Yup.” Troy touched the brim of his hat and then thought of something. “Say, where’s Gino?”

“Out with a bum knee,” Bill said, “torqued it pretty bad dancing on the bar last night.”

Sounded like something Gino would do. He walked down the steps onto the beach. He was right, the sand was burning hot. He trotted as fast as he could toward the Ritz. Ten people were waiting in line at the tiki hut to rent boats and boards and floats. Don was trying frantically to help them and threw up his hands when he saw Troy.

“Bout damn time, Tony-boy,” he said through gritted teeth. “Get in here and help these people.”

“It’s Troy, Don. And my shift hasn’t even started yet.”

“Well, get your ass in here, *Troy*,” Don barked and jabbed his finger at his chest, “or you won’t *have* any more shifts to start.”

Troy shook his head, walked behind the counter, and started helping the line of tourists.



TAZ PULLED his bike up to the Tennis Garden and chained it to the rack out back. The first few nights after his *encounter* with Caroline Colpiller had been sleepless and long. He’d been sure that a knock would come at his door and a policeman would arrest him and drag him away. But the knock had never come, and the longer he got away from that day, the more comfortable he’d grown with believing he’d gotten away with it. He walked into the Tennis Garden lobby and waved to Betty.

“Hiya, gal,” he said, beaming, “what’s on tap today?”

“Oh, hi Taz,” she said and smiled back. “You’ve got three lined up for twelve o’clock, starting with some new guy.” She glanced down at a piece of paper. “Ummm... a Mr. Smith?”

“Fantastic.” He shrugged his shoulders, turned, and strode into the locker room.

Rounding the corner, he froze. A man was standing there, with one foot propped up on a bench and tying his tennis shoes. He was turned away from Taz, but his face was clear in the mirror across the room. It was the weird fetish magazine dude from the Food Spot. *What gives*, thought Taz, *is this guy following me?* He backed out of the room as quickly and quietly as he could, jogged out the front door and scanned the parking lot. Sure enough, there was a rental car—a different one—but the tag said *Biscayne Chariots*, just like the one he’d seen him in before.

“Mr. Smith, my ass,” Taz muttered.

Whatever this guy was up to, Taz wasn’t having any of it. He scooted around the outside of the building, unchained his bike, and hopped on. He dialed the tennis center.

“Yeah, Betty.” he coughed loudly. “I’m gonna have to cancel m’lessons today. Just got sick in the locker room.”

“Oh, Tazzie, that’s too bad,” she said in a grandmotherly voice, “that twenty-four-hour stomach bug has been going around. You’d better get home and get some chicken noodle soup in you.”

“Ah, thanks, Betty,” he said and coughed again, “and can you have Nathan cover m’lessons?”

“Sure thing,” she said, “don’t you worry about it.”

“Alright, good,” he said. “Ah’ll most likely see you in the morning.”

He hung up and pedaled hard without looking back. He wanted to get away fast before *Mr. Smith* came out and saw him. He got a block away before a thought occurred to him.

“If this guy’s gonna be followin’ me,” —Taz stopped his bike— “ah’m gonna turn the tables and find out what’s up with this bloke.”

He pedaled slowly back toward the Tennis Garden and eased around the corner. A Ritz-Carlton maintenance truck was idling in the grass as a worker watered some non-native bushes in the median.

Peeking from behind a massive palm tree, he could see Mr. Smith getting into his rental car. He dropped his bike and snuck into the truck while the worker had his back turned. He eased down low in the driver’s seat so he could watch the rental car drive away without being seen.

Mr. Smith turned right out of the Ritz, and Taz eased out to follow him. He could hear the worker yelling in the distance as they drove toward the island causeway.

“Right, Smith,” he muttered as he drifted back a few cars to keep from being obvious, “let’s see what you’re up to.”

No Turning Back

Thursday morning's Miami Herald was the first paper to run with a story about the future of Senator Gil Dickerson's political career. The glowing piece outlined how Dickerson had all but clinched the Florida gubernatorial race and that with a decent three or four-year run would easily be the Democratic Party's front-runner for president. Gil's phone rang and he saw it was James calling.

"I guess you saw it too," he smiled into the receiver.

"What'd I tell you, old boy?" James Hardy asked. "Everyone in my office is talking about it."

"Well, that's a long way off, James," said Gil, and he stood up and walked to the kitchen window.

Sandy was pruning a rose bush and tossing dead buds into a bucket. She loved that garden. Gil made a mental note to have his assistant pick up some kind of new plant for her.

"Soonah than you think, my friend." His accent started to take on a JFK tone. "You're gonna need to start a short list."

"Oh, hell, now," Gil protested, "let's not get ahead of ourselves."

James laughed. "Ah'm just sayin'."

"Okay, okay," said Gil, his smile getting a little wider, "I'll get a yellow pad out and get started today."

A couple of seconds of silence followed. Gil could hear James sipping a cup of coffee... or maybe brandy... who knew what he'd be drinking at this hour.

"So, um—" Gil started.

James interrupted him. "All squared away, my friend. No need to talk about that anymore... not on this line."

Gil turned away from the window, as if he needed to shield his wife from the conversation. "The boat?"

"I don't know what boat you're talking about, Gil," James said, his tone darker. "There nevah was a boat."

Gil knew that the boat had been demolished or sunk or blown up or something. It had officially been disappeared. He breathed a sigh of

relief... a small one. Without the boat, there was nothing to connect him to the girl, even if they did find her. He felt like a small glimmer of light was starting to shine at the end of the tunnel.

"Hun?" Sandy's voice echoed from the back door.

"Gotta go, James," Gil said and clicked his phone shut. "In the kitchen, dear."

She walked in, pulling her gloves off her hands. She leaned forward and kissed him, careful not to get any dirt on his freshly starched shirt. "Off to the office?" she asked, rinsing her hands in the sink.

"Oh, uh, yeah," he said and brushed his tie down, "just for a bit. Voting on the Saracen bill."

"Okay, dear," she said and smiled blankly. "Would you like a sandwich or something to take with you?"

"No, no," he said, slipping on his suit jacket. "I'll get something on the way."

She dried her hands and touched him on the cheek. "My hero. Saving the world, one bill at a time."

Gil shuddered. He certainly didn't feel like a hero today... maybe he would tomorrow.

"Will you be late?" she asked.

"Not sure," he said, walking for the door, "depends on how many nays we get. Could be in for a filibuster too."

"Oh, gee," she said, frowning, "I'm sorry, hun. Well, don't worry about me. I have my bridge club tonight."

Gil nodded and walked out. He started his car and turned on the radio. Talk Chat 101 was on and the caller was talking about how Gil Dickerson was going to be a fine governor and how he'd vote for him for president today if he were on the ballot. Gil turned it up and pulled out of the driveway.

Maybe today he'd turn the corner, from looking back, to looking forward.



REMINGTON HOYT REGINALD pulled his rental car into the cramped garage under his apartment building. Liberty Square was no fancy neighborhood, and his place was no shimmering high-rise, but at least it came with parking. As he jogged toward the elevator and chirped his car alarm, he saw Myrtle Tomlinson was getting in too. *Dammit*, he thought. He was still in his tennis clothes from the busted lesson with Taz at the Ritz. She was older, maybe seventy-five, and very frail, but she was nothing like Gram. Crotchety and angry at all times, she was the kind of person you didn't ask if everything was okay, you asked if

anything was okay. Remington pursed his lips together as he stepped in.

"Hard to play tennis with a briefcase," she said, glaring at him through one slitted eye.

"Yeah," he said, "tough day at the courts. Up, please."

"What floor?" she practically growled.

"Mrs. Tomlinson," he said flatly, "I have lived on the third floor for the past five years."

She punched the number five angrily and scowled at him.

"Someday when you get older," she said, jabbing a finger at him, "you'll start forgetting things too. Like what you had for breakfast, or how to button a shirt, or maybe whether or not you've crapped your pants—if you even wore pants, that is."

"Doubtful," he said. The elevator dinged and he got off. "Have a wonderful day," he called sarcastically.

"Screw you," came her muffled reply from behind the closing doors.

He inhaled slowly as he trotted down the dingy hall to his door. He looked left then right, waiting to see if anyone was watching him. When you watched others, you started wondering if they were watching you back. He clicked the key into the lock, rushed inside, and shut the door quietly behind him. The air inside the apartment smelled faintly of mothballs and old people. The memories came at him as they always did.

"Gram, I'm home," he called into the room.

There would be no answer, but he still liked to announce himself. He dropped his briefcase by the door and tossed his keys into a bowl on the antique table beneath the mirror. He noticed he was still wearing the tennis whites he'd worn for the lesson. *Ugh*, he thought, *disgusting, white after Labor Day*.

Pulling off the clothes as he walked, he wandered into the kitchen and jerked open the refrigerator. Twisting the cap off the Perrier made a satisfying hiss, and he practically chugged it down, washing the sour taste of vomit from his mouth. He felt his stomach rumble and a deep belch escaped his lips.

"Excuse me," he called out.

Gram preferred manners, and he was obliged to display them at all times, even when no one else was present.

Feeling himself slowly recover back into his calm and cool surroundings, he walked toward the back door. The breeze was swaying the trees outside. He slid the door open and stepped onto his balcony. He took a sip of his bubbling water and inhaled slowly. Closing his eyes, he tried to let the ridiculous events of the day drift away into nothingness. The warmth of the sun began to sink into his

skin and sweat began to form on his brow. A wolf whistle came from across the street and he jerked his eyes open to see a group of young Latino boys staring at him and pointing. He looked down and realized he was still buck naked.

“Oh, shit,” he said, and jumped back into his apartment and slammed the door behind him. He hurried back away from the huge sliding glass door and into the hall.

He skipped back to the bedroom and walked straight through to the shower. He jerked the knob over and it thankfully ran hot quickly. He took one more sip, laid the bottle on the counter, and stepped in. He let the rushing water run over him. When he was finally pink and pruned, he stepped out. He was ready.

He wrapped his luxurious white Brunello Cucinelli bathrobe around his body and combed his hair back. His hairline was still perfect and his forehead was smooth... no Botox needed here.

Opening the jewelry box on his bedside table, he took out the brass skeleton key.

It was time.



TAZ HELD HIS BREATH. The man who'd been following him—that he was now following—had stopped quickly and unexpectedly beside the dumpster in the apartment building's parking lot. Taz screeched to a halt and jerked the wheel of the Ritz-Carlton maintenance truck left into a handicapped parking space at the front of the building. He watched the man fumble around inside the car, then exit the car completely naked, and toss a rumpled pile of clothing into the dumpster. *Strange bugger.*

The man was definitely paranoid and was constantly turning his head from left and right, watching.

Taz crouched low in the truck seat and stayed motionless. The man hopped back into his car and pulled into the garage under the building. Taz waited a minute and then pulled in after him. Again, he cruised in behind the man at a safe distance, sidled into a space when he saw the man park his car, and watched him—again totally naked—jog up to the elevator door.

He watched as the man entered next to a hideous old hag, have some sort of terse exchange with her, and then the doors closed. The numbers on the door dinged up until they stopped on the third floor. Then after a moment, it continued on up to five.

Third floor or fifth floor, Taz thought. He hopped out of the truck and jogged to the stairwell. He didn't want to bump into the man coming back down the elevator having forgotten something, or pop

out on his floor suddenly with no cover. He took the stairs three at a time and was breathless as he reached the third floor. He peeked out the security window down the dingy hallway. No sign of anyone.

He opened the door and stepped into the hall. There were six doors, three on each side, and he walked to the first one and put his ear near the door. The sound of a muffled television playing some Spanish game show drifted out the door, followed by the spicy smell of tacos, or enchiladas, or burritos, or something like that. His stomach growled.

He stepped to the next door and pressed his ear to it. He jumped when the door suddenly pushed in and opened.

“Oh, shite, sorry,” said Taz, and jumped back and raised his hands up, “ah was just lookin’ for a...”

He stopped when he realized no one was standing at the door.

“Allo?” he called.

No response. Gently, he put a finger on the door and pushed his way in. The apartment was bare; no furniture, no pictures, no television, no people... nothing. Apparently, this unit was vacant. He pulled the door to, but didn’t click it shut. As he got closer to the third door, he heard the elevator ding, but it sailed past the third floor without stopping. Inside the third apartment, he heard a shower being turned on.

A voice called out from behind the door. “Excuse me.”

He had no idea what that meant, but he stepped away from the door. Taz thought the man had somehow figured out he was here. He ran back toward the second door and stepped inside. He pulled the door shut and crouched down, waiting for the man next door to discover him. Through the paper-thin walls of the apartment, he heard the man close a shower curtain and begin humming. Maybe he hadn’t discovered him after all. Taz stood slowly and looked around.

The tile floor echoed as he walked, so he slipped off his shoes and padded toward the back in his socks. He slid the balcony door open and stepped into the balmy heat. He looked to his right and saw a similar balcony outside the other man’s apartment. It was about four feet away. Not an easy jump... but doable. Taz inclined his ear and could still hear the shower flowing.

He climbed the rusty, rickety and wobbly rail, and using his hand against the stucco exterior of the building, he steadied himself for a jump. *Just over a meter*, he thought, *nothing to it*. He crouched and heaved his legs up and out. As he did, the railing under him slammed backward, falling completely away from the balcony and grating loudly as it slid down and crashed onto the pavement three stories below him.

“Shit!” Taz yelled as he flailed through the air.

His hands reached out and barely grasped the railing on the man's balcony; if it was loose like his, he would surely fall. His suddenly sweaty palms slid down the railing as if it was covered with Vaseline. His heart thumped out of his chest as he reached the bottom. His grip was good from all those two-handed backhands, and he managed to hang on to the lower rail. He swung wildly in the air beneath the balcony. Slowly, he began to regain his composure and balance. Swinging there, he waited for the man's balcony door to open and the dude to come out and discover him hanging there... but it never did.

Over the din of nearby traffic, he could hear the shower still running. Catching his breath, he pulled himself up the railing—thank God it was solid—and onto the balcony. No turning back now; he wasn't sure he wanted to jump back to his balcony without a railing to hold onto.

He crouched below the level of the window, probably the kitchen, and waited. The shower turned off and he heard the man humming as he moved across the apartment.

He could easily see the man walk past the big sliding glass door, but the man, whose eyes had been darting left and right all day, never turned to look out. He was walking with intent, and had some kind of key in his hand as he stalked through the living room into another room across the apartment. The man walked through the door and closed it behind him. The apartment was empty. Taz reached up and wrapped his fingers around the handle on the door. He tugged. The door slid open.

Gram Dolls

Gram, or more specifically, Martha Inez Reginald, had been dead for over fifteen years. Remington had killed her. Of course, he hadn't meant to kill her... it had been a complete accident, but he was to blame either way. The courts had exonerated him, finding no fault in the inquiry, and sealed the records as he was still technically a minor when it had happened. Remington could remember it like it was yesterday. Sometimes, he'd wake up in a cold sweat, trembling and crying... reliving the nightmare of that fateful day.

He'd heard the story so many times he could almost recite it himself. Gram would finish washing the dishes from Sunday dinner and waddle into the living room, damp dish towel still hanging from her hands.

"Do you want some pie, Remi?" she'd always ask, forgetting that he despised pie.

"No, Gram," he'd say with a patient smile, wondering if there would come a day that she wouldn't remember him at all, "but thank you for offering."

She'd pat him on the head. "Such a well-mannered young man. Gram loves you so much, Remi."

And he'd smile as she slumped down into the squeaky armchair by the door. The TV would be on, naturally showing her son's local televangelist program, but the sound would be down low. *Something, something, Gawddd, something, something, Hellfire!* Remington hated hearing it, but he got pretty good at tuning it out.

Sunday mornings were always the same, and most of them were good. But not this one. This one would be the worst... the worst one ever.

"Did I ever tell you..." Gram started.

Oh, shit, Remington thought, here it comes again... God, not again, please Gram.

"... about the time I went to Italy?" she continued.

It was the same story. The damn tomato pie story! It literally went

on for hours. The same details about the cobblestone streets. The same details about the bicycles they'd been riding. The same details about the roads they'd taken down out of the hills. The same details about searching for the perfect café for lunch. The same damn details... every damn time. And it went on and on and on and on and...

"And we found that café and ordered our lunch," she droned, beaming at him with a twinkle in her eye, "and ohhh, I wish you could've tasted it, Remi. It was the most delicious thing I've ever eaten."

Remington felt his anger rising. He couldn't do it again. He couldn't sit here and listen to it anymore. He boiled at the thought of Gram droning on and on with her story. She'd forgotten that she'd told him the story before, of course, but Remi hadn't forgotten it. No, he knew it all too well.

And the first hundred times or so, he *had* been interested... and then faked being interested... and then he got completely bored and ignored it. But something snapped in him today. Something about her insistence that he listen. Something about the goddamn story broke him inside. She rocked back and forth in her creaking chair, reaching the part of the story about smashing the grapes with her feet and then drinking the wine from last year's batch that she'd probably smashed on her last visit and yada, yada, fucking yada.

Oh, God, Remington's mind screamed at him, just stop. Please make it stop.

And then she reached it, the climax, the punch line, the whole reason for the story. The stunning revelation that you'd been waiting for, for at least two hours. The insight into the universal truth that she'd discovered and just had to let you in on...

"And, wouldn't you know it Remi," she said, laughing as she slapped her knees, "this lunch we ordered, that we thought was so delicious and unlike anything we'd ever had before... it was pizza!"

Okay, that's it! Remington stood and clenched his fists. *I can't freaking take it anymore.*

Gram let it rip. "But we didn't know it was pizza! Because they called it tomato pie!! She tilted her head back and laughed raucously.

Remington was furious, and leaned over Gram and yelled at her. "How could you not know it was goddamn pizza, Gram?!" he yelled. "If it looks like a pizza, smells like a pizza, and tastes like a pizza, I don't care if they called it freaking tomato ass sandwiches, I would know it was a freaking PIZZA!!!"

He grabbed her by the arms and slammed her backward into her chair. Her eyes jerked open wide.

"Oh, Remi," she whimpered, "you're hurting me."

But he didn't hear her. "I've heard that story over and over again,

Gram. I don't want to hear the story again... EVER! And I don't like fucking pie!!"

He threw her backward into the chair so hard it tipped back, struck the wall, and then slid sideways and spilled the old woman into the floor.

She moaned once and then stopped.

It was the last time he'd ever go to Gram's house, because she was moved to intensive care. Her eyes had glazed over, taking on a far-away look, and she didn't speak for over a year. He visited every day, and apologized every single one of them. He begged her to tell him the story... every single day... for over a year. The only time she ever responded in any meaningful way was when she spotted a girl walking down the hall with a doll. Just a cheesy little baby doll from the hospital gift shop.

That was the day Remington started bringing them to her. A new doll every day. She loved them. He would bring them to her, and she would hug them and rock back and forth. And right until the day that he brought her the last doll, she hadn't spoken a single word... until the end.

"I love you, Remi," she had said with tears in her eyes, staring at the new doll.

She rocked it gently, smoothed its hair with her hand, and kissed it on the cheek.

She handed the doll to him after a few minutes. "I want you to have her... something to remember me by."

And the next day, she was gone. Remington went straight down to Charlie's Pizza, ordered a large, deep-dish pepperoni with extra sauce, and ate tomato pie with his Gram doll sitting next to him.

He still had the doll... her name was Gram, and he was her Remi. He closed the door behind him and locked it with the skeleton key.

He took off his robe and folded it. Laying it down on the chair beside the bed, he slipped into the nightgown that was hanging on the hook behind the door. It was Gram's nightgown... the last one she had ever worn. He hadn't always worn it when he came in here, no, that had only started six months ago or so. It made him feel... closer to her. He put an old John Denver record on the old Victrola that came from her house, turned on the old black and white television set—tuned to nothing in particular—and sat back in the old armchair from her house. It still squeaked something awful, but that reminded him of her too.

He picked up his Gram doll and clutched it close to his chest. He rocked back and forth, and sang John Denver's Greatest Hits to her.

TAZ FROZE when he heard the music start in the next room. A chair squeaked and he heard a man's voice warbling to the tune of Rocky Mountain High. *This guy's a freak a' nature*, Taz thought.

When he was certain he was still undiscovered, he crept further into the living room. It was sparse; generic décor, likely purchased from a picture in a European catalog, no photos of any kind, no magazines, nothing personal. The only thing that looked like it could offer any clues as to who this dude was, was the briefcase by the front door.

He tiptoed across the room, convinced he could get away with the briefcase and that the man would never know what—

At that moment, the floorboard he'd stepped on let out an incredibly loud groan. Taz froze. The music in the next room suddenly stopped. He heard the loud creaking of the chair and footsteps toward the door. He heard the key clinking into the lock.

Shit, he thought and bolted toward the door. He grabbed the briefcase and flung the door wide. As he ran through, the edge of the case caught the frame of the door and flew open. Papers shot out and fluttered everywhere. Taz knelt down and shoved several of the loose sheets into the briefcase, and jammed a thick manila folder into his pants. He heard the man behind the door curse and fumble more with the key.

"Who's there?" the man called out, "I'm calling 911!"

Taz ran into the hall and slammed the man's apartment door behind him. Twenty steps away, the elevator door was open, but closing too fast. Knowing he'd never make it and that he'd surely be caught by the man if he took the stairs, inspiration hit. He flung the briefcase down the hall. It bumped once on the floor and tumbled end over end, spilling a trail of papers as it went. On its last somersault, it flew in between the sliding doors of the elevator as they whooshed shut. With a quick jump to the side, Taz leapt into the next-door apartment he'd first gone in and closed the door behind him.

He slumped down with his back against the door and fought to slow his breathing. He could hear the muffled thumps of the man opening his own door and running down the hall.

"Dammit!" the man yelled.

Taz was certain he'd be slamming his fist against the door he was leaning on any second now, certain he was caught. But the echoing footsteps of the man running down the hall approached, got louder, and then passed him by and continued down the hall toward the elevator. Next he heard the furious clicking of the elevator button.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," the man said as fast as he clicked, "slow ass, piece of—"

He was interrupted by the ding of the elevator opening. Taz heard

the man get in and start the process of shuffling papers back into the case. The door closed, and Taz was left in silence.

He knew he had just a few seconds to make his escape before the man would be coming back up. Running down the hall, he grabbed a few more of the loose papers and stuffed them into his shirt. He jerked open the stairwell door and clip-clopped his way down as fast as he could. Reaching the bottom, he crouched below the narrow, wire-lined window in the door. He peeked through the bottom of the window just in time to see the elevator door closing and the numbers start counting back up.

He opened the door slowly, still crouching, and stuck his head out. No sign of the guy.

He shuffled across the parking garage, jumped into the Ritz-Carlton maintenance truck, and squealed out of the lot. At the first red light, he dug the folders out of his pants, along with the random pages he'd grabbed in the hall. The folder on top, crumpled a bit and damp with his sweat, had a label that read: *Gil Dickerson*. He had no clue who that was and could care less.

The second folder had no label. He flipped it open and found a yellow legal pad sheet of paper with some scribbled notes in black, perfectly scripted handwriting:

*Missing girl—Caroline Colpiller
prob off on bender
check Bonnaroo, Coachella, Burning Man
Father—Jack Colpiller
internet entrepreneur, millionaire
Sister—twin—Mindy Colpiller
no contact with CC, phone off/dead*

BELOW THESE NOTES, in blue and clearly more hurried, he'd obviously added to his previous observations:

*CC car found—check Ted email
Voicemail from JC
check out Taz (?) at Tennis Garden on KB
boyfriend?
lesson scheduled 10:45 am*

UNDER THIS LAST LINE, he had scribbled:

Taz—NO SHOW.

HE'D CIRCLED Taz's name several times in red ink.

“Shit,” Taz muttered, “this bloke’s on to me. Some kind of investigator or something.”

There were another couple of pages. One was an 8x10 photo of Caroline—probably a school yearbook picture. The second was a printout of the staff page of the Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden. Taz’s picture was circled in that same red pen.

Behind him, a car honked angrily. He hadn’t noticed that the light had turned green. He screeched out and flipped the bird at the driver behind him as he raced away. As he drove, he wondered if the private investigator’s body would fit in the trunk in the lighthouse with Caroline’s.

He reached up to turn on the radio and his eyes flitted to the time.

“Aw hell yeah,” he said as he sped up, his grin at last returning. There was still time to make his lesson with Mindy.

Maybe this day wasn’t going so badly after all.

Hedge Holes

Troy Clint Bodean, former Afghanistan Apache AH-64 chopper

pilot, sat on the edge of his bed staring at the shoe box sitting in his lap. His shift had ended at the beach and he'd taken a long, cold shower. The sand, sunscreen, and windburn had done a number on his skin, so he preferred not to rinse in hot water. He wasn't sure if he was shivering from the cold... or the fact that he'd just gotten tangled up into another crazy situation with a possible dead gir—

He made himself stop that line of thinking. They couldn't be sure that Caroline Colpiller was dead—she might just be on some hippie road trip. He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. His black hair was turning gray at the temples.

In his best Danny Glover imitation, he said, "I'm getting' too old for dis shit."

Or wait, was it Mel Gibson who'd said that line? Maybe both. Either way, he felt the truth of it today.

He swallowed hard and took a deep breath. He hadn't opened this box since all the trouble back on Pawleys Island. Opening the lid slowly, he took the cleaning cloth off the Beretta M9. It was the same one he'd brought back from Afghanistan, an unusual thing to happen, but he'd asked for it in return for solving the case of the knucklebones. The powers-that-be had immediately denied his written request but two weeks later, when he was back stateside, an unmarked, no postage paid package arrived on his doorstep. It was his gun. Someone, somewhere in some clandestine agency, had apparently taken it upon themselves to grant his request. Troy decided not to ask any questions, and just accepted the mysterious gift.

He laid the gun back into the box and slid it under his bed. He wouldn't need it just, yet but he knew the time would probably come when he would feel more secure with it tucked into his waistband.

Clicking open his cell phone, he tapped out a message to Mindy.

-I'm off. Ready to meet?

He waited a couple of minutes. No answer.

-You there?

Nothing.

Then it flashed into his memory... she'd said something about a tennis lesson with Taz. He jumped up and pulled his door open. Stopping short, he turned back to look at the box under his bed... *not yet*, he thought. But something nagged at him about not being prepared for the worst, and he knelt down to retrieve the box. He opened it, grabbed the gun, slid a magazine in, checked the safety, and shoved the gun into his waistband behind his back.

"In for a penny," he muttered as he headed out the door, "in for a pound."

He jogged all the way to the front gate at the Ritz-Carlton. The entrance was guarded by a row of huge palms that were obviously only recently planted. The guard at the gate recognized him and waved him in past the cross bar. Troy nodded at him and sped up.

The Tennis Garden was the first building on the right, a yellow, stucco job with a green metal roof and white awnings over every window. The entire perimeter of the building was a raised porch overlooking the ten immaculately groomed rubico clay courts. Troy had no idea what that was, but people claimed it was so much easier on the body to play on clay. The edges of the courts were not enclosed with the usual chain link fence, but rather a nine-foot-tall hedge, trimmed into a perfectly straight outer wall. Netting buried in the manicured bushes made entry into the courts impossible without going through the lobby. Troy jumped up the five stone steps in one bound and grabbed the door handle. Just as he was opening the door, a voice called out behind him.

"Whoa there!" the man said, "where are you headed in such a hurry?"

Troy turned and saw a Ritz-Carlton security officer walking toward him, hand on his holster. The holster held a *terrifying* can of pepper spray.

"Just lookin' for a friend of mine," Troy said and held his hands, letting the door swing closed. "There a problem, sir?"

The resort's equivalent of a mall cop seemed to relax a little, seeing Troy hold up his hands. His belly was rotund, his armpits were slightly damp, and his forehead was sunburned up to a line where a hat must've shaded his face. In fact, his hair was slicked back on his head as if he'd been wearing a hat all morning. He had beady yet friendly eyes... not really a threatening character at all. After a second, a look of recognition flashed over the man's face.

"Don't I know you?"

"You might," Troy said, lowering his hands a little, "I work down at the beach. You know, rentin' sailboats and surfboards and such."

“Ahhhhh, yeah,” the man said, nodding his head a little, but Troy guessed he didn’t really remember and was just being polite.

“Yup.” Troy took a step toward the tennis building. “So, I’m just hoppin’ in here to say hi to a friend on my way to work.”

“Huh,” said the security officer, whose name tag said Billy, “you don’t look like you’re dressed for work.”

Troy looked down at his cargo shorts and white t-shirt—definitely not a Ritz-Carlton approved work uniform. For employees who weren’t in-house staff, it was all white, all the time.

“Oh, um, yeah,” Troy stalled, “well, today is... it’s kind of um...”

Inside the building he spotted a maid spraying glass cleaner on some sort of display case. Inspiration hit.

“It’s a cleaning day,” Troy said suddenly, “you know, scrubbing the scum off of all the boats and boards.”

“Ahhhh yeah,” Billy said, still not quite fully understanding.

An awkward silence fell between them; Troy looking at Billy, Billy staring blankly back at Troy.

“Hey!” Billy said suddenly, startling Troy, “you wanna see something cool?”

Troy glanced back at the building, concern for Mindy trickling back into his mind.

“I dunno, man,” Troy said, trying to protest, “I really gotta get going.”

Billy pointed over toward one of the hedges. “Seriously, man, check this out. Just take a second.”

Troy inhaled slowly. “Okay, okay, just a second. Then I gotta go.”

Billy walked quickly toward the hedge wall and grabbed a branch. He pulled the branch to the side, exposing a small hole through the hedge. He beamed with pride.

“Nice,” Troy said, not sure what he was looking at.

“Go on,” Billy said, nodding toward the opening. “It’s Linda Morgenstern having her lesson.”

“Oh, uh... okay...”

“Wait,” Billy said, a wry smile spreading over his face, “you don’t know about Linda?”

Troy shook his head.

Billy laughed, and winked. “Just take a quick peek. Let’s just put it this way... tennis balls ain’t the only thing bouncin’ on that court.”

Troy leaned into the hedge and peered through the opening. Sure enough, a truly *gifted* lady was gyrating in all sorts of breast-bouncing maneuvers. Troy was certain she had practiced these attention-getting moves to ensure proper boob placement for maximum male enticement. It was quite a show. Troy could overhear snippets of the conversation.

“Right,” her tennis pro was saying as he put his hands around her waist, “be sure to put your shoulders back, left arm up, firm grip, and proper unit turn.”

Linda licked her lips and shoved her hips back into the young man teaching her.

“Oh, Josh,” she grinned, “you know I have a firm grip for your proper unit.”

Troy leaned back from the hedge. *Dangit, that ain’t Taz*, he thought, *and that sure as heck ain’t Mindy*.

“Cool,” he said, slapping Billy on the shoulder, “you enjoy that. I gotta get to work.”

Billy shrugged his shoulders and promptly stuck his head back into the hedge. As Troy walked away, he heard Billy muttering something about funbags and balloons.

He trotted up to the door of the Tennis Garden and hopped inside. The woman at the desk eyed him suspiciously.

“Hello ma’am,” Troy said, removing his hat, “I’m a friend of Taz’s. I work down at the beach and he told me I should come by and see him sometime.”

She softened a bit. “Oh, goodness, I just love that boy. He’s so friendly.”

Troy smiled and nodded. “A good dude, for sure.”

“But he left earlier this morning,” she said and looked down at a sheet showing the court reservations, “which is strange. He was supposed to hit with Mindy and then Linda. But he didn’t show up for either. Then again, neither did Mindy. But Linda did, and so we had to grab Josh out of another...”

Her voice faded away beneath the alarm bells now going off in Troy’s head. *Dangit*. He’d warned her not to get messed up with this guy, and now he feared something really bad had happened.

The woman at the counter was looking at him expectantly. Apparently, she had asked him a question.

“I’m sorry ma’am,” he said, “what did you ask me?”

“Did you want to leave a message for him?” she asked again.

“Can I just get his number and give him a ring?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, but company policy is that we can’t give out any numbers,” she apologized, “you understand.”

“Course, ma’am, thanks for your help.” Troy turned and walked away.

“Come back anytime,” she called to his back.

Troy clicked open his cell phone as he left the Tennis Garden. Still nothing from Mindy. Walking aimlessly away from the building, he wasn’t sure what to do next. Call the police? Call Mindy’s father? He clicked dial to try Mindy again—straight to voicemail. *Dangit*. Maybe

it was nothing. Maybe Mindy had simply gotten smart, canceled her lesson with Taz, and gone home. If she wasn't answering her phone, there was only one way to find out.

He looked up at the massive Grand Bay Resort and Residences building in front of him—Mindy's home, and the home of Mindy's father, Jack Colpiller. Troy knew that if he went up there to see if she was home, and in doing so, also meet her father, there would be no turning back. He'd be caught up in yet another murder mystery. He wondered if he shouldn't write all these stories down for a book. *Nah, nobody'd believe 'em anyhow*, he thought.

He took a deep breath, adjusted his hat, and walked toward the door of the giant yellow building.

"Here we go," he muttered to himself.

Part II

What's That Smell?



“And now I’ve got to explain the smell that was in there before I went in there.”

-Ellen DeGeneres

Blackmail For You, Sir

Gil Dickerson was shocked when his opponent, Anna Martinez, gracefully bowed out of the gubernatorial race. He'd missed the story buried in the Miami Herald on a back page in fine print, about a new investigation into the citizenship status of Anna's husband. Gil had already gone down that rabbit hole,, when his campaign scraped the barrel for any dirt they could find on Anna and her family. He'd found nothing to suggest any citizenship issues, but apparently there was some date discrepancy on a few of the immigration documents that implied Anna's husband had received a speedier-than-usual certification. It was most likely nothing, but her sudden withdrawal made it seem as if she'd influenced the immigration board in some way... and that was a no-no. Thus, he was left in an uncontested race for...

"Holy shit," he said, and stared at the story's headline, "I'm the damn governor of Florida."

"What's that, hun?" Sandy called from the other room.

"Anna Martinez," he said over his shoulder, "she dropped out of the race today."

"That's nice, hun."

Gil shrugged his shoulders. His wife obviously didn't fully comprehend what had just happened, but that was okay for now. He'd let her know over a night out and a glass of champagne or three.

"Governor Gil Dickerson," he said to himself. "Who'd have thought?"

And that's when his desk phone rang. The phone on his desk was an official line, operated by an intern, acting as his secretary for official public business. Someone else had apparently just gotten the news. Three more lines lit up. Apparently, everyone had gotten the news.

He picked up the first line. "Senator Gil Dickerson."

"Doncha mean Governor Gil Dickerson?" It was James Hardy.

"Ha, yes, I suppose so," Gil said, laughing.

"It's official, old buddy," James said. "I knew you could do it."

"Thank you, James." Gil leaned back in his leather chair. "I had no idea about Anna's husband."

"Well, now," James said in a conspiratorial tone, "tip-offs are in interesting business. Who knows who could've exposed such information?"

The implication was that James had made the discovery and leaked the damning information to the press. The *implication* that her husband was in the country illegally was all that was needed to push Anna over the edge and out of the race. Maybe there actually was something there, and Anna didn't want it brought into the light of day.

"So, Governor Dickerson," James started again, "how's that shortlist of potential V.P.s comin' along?"

Gil could almost hear the sneering grin in the man's voice.

"Oh, come now, James," Gil said, pulling a yellow pad on his desk closer to him, "it's far too early for that."

"Friend, I don't know if you've figured it out yet or not," —James' tone got a little more serious— "but the people have chosen their next leader. It all starts in Florida, ya know?"

Gil looked at the pad in front of him. It had a heading that simply said: VP.

It had three names on it. Friends from the senate that all shared similar political viewpoints. None excited him, and probably wouldn't excite the public either. He hadn't given it much thought, but the way things were going, he was clearly the party's new pet. He would be groomed and prepared over the next few years to ascend to the highest office in the land. There would be deals and backroom handshakes, but if he could win the White House... maybe he really could change the world.

"Gil," —the voice on the line became even more serious and quiet— "I want you to look at that list in front of you... I know it's there. And I want you to think long and hard about what I've done for you."

"I—" Gil opened his mouth to speak, but James Hardy interrupted him.

"It's a damn shame that all that nasty business about Anna Martinez's husband had to come to light," he said quietly, "and it would be a damn shame if any other... nasty business came to light about anyone else involved in this race. Or the next race."

Gil closed his mouth. A vision of Jackie, the intern he'd murdered on James Hardy's boat, flashed into his mind. His hand shook slightly as he gripped the phone receiver tighter.

James Hardy would be his pick for Vice President. That was the clear message. There would be no other choices, no vetting of any

other senators, no background checks on any other governors. No, it would be Gil Dickerson and James Hardy.

Gil inhaled slowly. He scratched out the three names he had scribbled on the yellow pad and wrote James Hardy underneath. He circled it so harshly that his pen ripped through the paper as it passed around.

“Why, James,” he said through gritted teeth, “you know I only ever had one choice in mind.”

A moment of silence passed.

“That’s good, Gil,” James said, “that’s real good. We make a good team, you and I.”

Another line flashed on the desk phone.

“James, I’ve got to take this call,” he said quickly, “be in touch soon.”

“You better—”

Gil hung up the receiver, interrupting James. He sat back in his chair and stared at all of the flashing lines on the phone. He’d let the intern handle those.



REMINGTON HOYT REGINALD sat in his apartment at the rickety kitchen table. He had gathered the papers that had been strewn in the floor of the hallway by the intruder. He hadn’t gotten a look at him, so he had no idea what had happened. Had Senator Gil Dickerson sent someone to steal the information he had on him? No, that wasn’t possible. No one knew he had anything on him yet. He hadn’t revealed that to anyone except the crime lab. Hmmm, maybe a lab tech had spilled the beans? Not likely, as they dealt with this kind of thing all the time. Surely their people were scrutinized, background checked, and routinely examined to ensure confidentiality and security. *Okay, so if not a tech, then who?* he mused.

Maybe just a fluke break-in? That didn’t seem likely either, but what else could it be? He stared at the papers laid out on the table. There was a crime lab report on the blood from Dickerson’s boat, a photograph of the teeth he’d recovered, and a D.N.A. scan showing them to belong to Jackie Ranchero-Doral. The third sheet from that file was an email printed out from Jackie’s husband, initiating the suspected adultery case. He hadn’t contacted the husband yet to confirm the adultery, because now it might actually be confirming her murder. He slid that pile to the side and decided to work out that particular mess later.

The next stack of papers dealt with the Colpiller missing daughter case. One was a small high-school picture of Caroline Colpiller—

horribly out-of-date. The second was a D.M.V. report from Ted at Miami P.D. on the plate he'd run for Caroline's car. It had been found in the parking lot of some South Beach club and impounded. Remington made a mental note to check out the car later today. He thought twice about returning the money he'd been paid for that case and shutting it down. He had bigger plans for the Dickerson case... if he still had enough to work with. He opened a new manila folder and shoved the papers in it. Scribbling *Colpiller* on the tab, he laid it aside.

Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes and tried to think. He was brought out of his meditation when someone knocked on his door. *Who the hell could that be?* He walked across the room and jerked the door open.

"What is it?" he demanded.

Myrtle Tomlinson was standing at the door, crotchety as ever. She looked him up and down with an arched eyebrow. He realized he was still wearing his Gram's nightgown.

He wrapped his arms around his chest in an effort to cover some of the gown.

"Yes, Mrs. Tomlinson, what is it?" he asked.

"Aincha glad I remembered where you live?" she almost growled.

She had several crumpled papers clutched in her left hand; her right was on her cane. She shook them at him.

"Don't be leavin' yer trash all over the place, young man," she said and practically threw the paper at him.

He scrambled to grab them all, and could tell at a glance they were from his briefcase.

"Thank you, Mrs. Tomlinson," he said, smiling, but she was already waddling down the hall.

He turned around and closed the door behind him. Christ, what else could possibly go wrong tod—

His thought was cut short by the sound of scratching in Gram's room. Someone was in there. Was it the intruder, coming back for more? He tiptoed over to the table and laid the papers down as quietly as he could. He pulled the skeleton key from his pocket and eased it into the lock. The scratching continued. It sounded like he was trying to dig a hole... what the hell?

The lock clicked and he threw the door open, calling out, "Stop where you are!"

There wasn't much that scared Remington, but he stopped dead in his tracks. Sitting in the small wooden rocking cradle with dolls strewn out on the floor around it, and scratching at the blanket trying to climb underneath it... was a skunk, a real live skunk, black and white stripes all over it.

He backed toward the door and eased into the living room. The

skunk resumed his digging into the blanket.

“Stop,” he said before he could help himself.

It was a special blanket he’d had made for his Gram doll, and he didn’t want the skunk to rip it up. Surprisingly, the skunk stopped, then sat up and looked at him. It raised a paw to its mouth and licked it... cleaning itself like a cat. Remington didn’t dare startle it for fear it might spray all over his things.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that he’d left his cell phone on the kitchen table. He eased back out of his Gram doll room and laid down the random scraps of paper that Mrs. Tomlinson had brought to him, then picked up his phone. Searching for the number for Animal Control, he glanced back at the doorway to see the skunk waddling into his living room. He froze, not wanting to upset the creature. It walked toward him and hopped up on the table.

As tame as it was, he wondered if it was one of those exotic pets that people took in, pot-bellied pig, or possum... or skunk. If so, it was likely its scent glands had been removed. It took a couple of steps closer to him, inched its nose up, and sniffed the air. Then it rolled onto its back, much like a cat, and mewed. This had to be a pet. Tentatively, Remington reached his hand out and gently touched the skunk’s belly. It smacked its lips together and arched its back. He petted it a couple of times and it seemed to enjoy it. He smiled; definitely a pet.

And that’s when his phone rang. The noise startled the skunk, who abruptly jumped up and sank his teeth into the fleshy skin between Remington’s thumb and forefinger. When he yelped in pain, the skunk hissed at him, jumped down from the table, and ran back into the Gram doll room. But not before unloading a massive spray into the air, all over Remington and trailing behind him as he scurried away.

“Geezzus Christ!” Remington yelled, and squeezed his hand.

Blood was seeping from the wounds and he was sure he would probably get rabies now. Stupid freaking skunk. He ran to the kitchen, eyes burning from the acrid smell filling the apartment and gagging as it overwhelmed the air in the tiny living room. The stench was all around him like a noxious fog of acrid odor. He jerked the kitchen taps on and shoved his injured hand under the cold water. It stung as it ran over the puncture wounds from the skunk bite. With his other hand, he found and dialed a local animal control company.

“Can you hold, please?” asked the voice on the other line, and then clicked over to bland elevator music.

“No, no, no...” Remington tried to interrupt, but the operator was gone.

He hung up the phone. “Dammit.”

The pain throbbed in his hand, but wounds didn’t look too serious,

just a couple of small holes, like someone had tried to sew a button to his hand. But the smell... *God, the smell.* He stumbled over to the sliding glass balcony door and yanked it open. He stepped out and inhaled the fresh air deep into his lungs. Looking back into the apartment, he saw no sign of the skunk. He grabbed the corner of his robe and put it over his nose and mouth. Quietly, he tiptoed his way back in and toward the Gram doll room. The door was still open. He peeked around the edge of the jamb and saw the skunk, curled up in the cradle... holding a doll. It was his Gram doll! The skunk looked up at him, hissed, then laid its head down and closed its eyes.

You've got to be kidding me, thought Remington. He backed out of the room and closed the door. He opened his phone and redialed the animal control company. He got a recorded message that the operating hours of the company were over for the day and that he could leave a message.

"Shit," he mumbled.

The smell was insane and he wondered if anyone else could smell it on his floor. He stuck his head into the hall. It wasn't as harsh, but he was sure his nostrils had become desensitized to the odor by now. Closing his door, he slipped off his ruined robe and laid it down to block the opening beneath the door... hopefully preventing the smell seeping into the hall. He grabbed a small box fan from the closet and propped it up in the doorway, blowing to waft the smell outside. He couldn't tell if it was helping or not, but it seemed better to his assaulted nose.

He cranked the fan to high and papers went flying off the kitchen table, sucked out with the odor. He scrambled to catch them, dropping heavy coasters on them to hold them in place. Exhausted from the ordeal, he slumped down into one of the chairs and leaned his head back. He would be glad when this week was over.

A few minutes later, he opened his eyes and glanced down at the fluttering pages on the table. Disorganized as they were, he saw the one on top of the nearest pile was something he hadn't read yet. It was a new email from Ted at Miami P.D. that he'd printed to check out at a later time. He figured now was a later time, so he picked it up. It read:

Rem, found blood on Colpiller girl's steering wheel. Crime lab test shows one match in immigration to Adrian Hull. Secondary blood, no match in database, but tests shows female—maybe the Colpiller girls? Could be you've got a homicide on your hands. Had to report to command. Your case has an officer assigned to it now. Thought you might want to contact him. Det. Joe Bond.

THE OFFICER'S phone number was listed below his name. *Okay, Taz, what did you do?* Remington punched a number into his phone and waited.

"Senator Dickerson's office, how may I help you?" asked a girl on the other end of the line.

"I need to speak with the senator," Remington said calmly.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, "but he's in a meeting and can't be disturbed at this time. Can I take a message for him?"

"Oh, you're going to need to go get him," —Remington opened the file labeled Gil Dickerson Case— "this is an emergency."

"I'm sorry sir—"

"Get his ass on the phone now!"

"Hold, please," the girl said, a tinge of fear in her voice.

The line clicked and the bland elevator music came on. Remington waited thirty seconds before the line was answered.

"This is Gil Dickerson," the senator said angrily. "Who's this?"

"Hello, *Governor* Dickerson." Remington emphasized the new title. "We have some things to discuss. Some very important things about your little trip to Canal Point."

The line went quiet. After a few long seconds, the senator cleared his throat. "Not on this line," he said.

"Understood," Remington replied. "Come to the Pollo Tropical on 27th in one hour. Come alone. I'll know if you're followed."

"Done."

Remington hung up his phone. He heard a light scratching noise on the door to Gram's room.

"Screw you, skunk," he said to the closed door.

Tied Up At The Moment

Mindy Colpiller felt the tears streaming down her face trickle

over the edge of the duct tape covering her mouth. Her hair was stuck beneath the tape in places and pulled harshly on her scalp. It was dark, but a faint light filtered in from what appeared to be windows above her. They circled the room, which was completely circular. No corners, no doors... just the high apertures all the way around. She was lying on her side with her hands tied behind her back with a shoelace. No matter how much she tried to wriggle free, she was bound tight.

She squirmed toward the wall behind her and was gradually able to work her way into an upright sitting position. As her eyes adjusted, she could definitely make out windows above letting in what appeared to be moonlight. The room was empty, except for an old trunk in the center next to a platform with a massive glass ball on top. The air was thick with some sort of foul odor. It smelled like the inside of a restaurant dumpster. Looking around more, she noticed the outline of a hatch in the floor. Since there were no doors, she guessed that must be the way out.

As her vision increased, she made out a stenciled label on the trunk: OIL. And suddenly it came to her. The lighthouse. She was in the Cape Florida Lighthouse. And, since it was closed to the public and no one ever came up here... she was highly unlikely to be discovered. She inched her way toward the trap door in the floor and found it impossible to budge with her feet or her fingers behind her back. She screamed behind the tape, but the sound was muffled and quiet. Panic began to set in.

Why, Taz, why? she thought. He had tried to deny that he knew anything about Caroline's whereabouts, but she pressed him on it. Grilling him about their last lesson, he snapped, and told her to shut the hell up if she knew what was good for her. She didn't know why she'd said she was going to the police, but it had been the last straw. He'd grabbed her by the neck, shoved her into a Ritz-Carlton

maintenance truck, tied her hands with his shoelaces, and blindfolded her with his tennis headband.

After what seemed like an hour on the bumpiest road known to man, he'd picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. Metal stairs clanged as he carried her up and up and up. He dropped her on the floor and left her. She'd been able to slip the blindfold off by rubbing her knee up and down on it. And now she was stuck here until he came back... if he came back. And God, the smell... the awful smell.

The tears came again.



TROY BODEAN CLICKED the button on the express elevator to the penthouse. It dinged open and he stepped inside. An attendant in a getup that could only be described as a monkey grinder outfit, complete with a red vest lined in gold ribbon and a red fez hat with a gold tassel, ushered Troy inside.

"Good evening, sir," he said and eyed Troy up and down.

He probably didn't look like the typical visitor to the penthouse, but at this point he didn't care.

"Floor?" asked the monkey grinder.

Troy looked at the buttons on the panel. It didn't have numbers one or two, and instead had names; Sheringham at the bottom, Colpiller on top.

"Colpiller please."

"Very good, sir," the attendant said and pushed the button and the doors slid closed.

The inside of the elevator was burnished brass, and Troy could see his reflection. Khaki cargo shorts, white t-shirt, straw cowboy hat... basic beach bum attire. He saw the elevator attendant's eyes flash over to look at him, then back up to the glowing buttons.

"I'm a friend of Mindy's," Troy blurted, then immediately regretted it.

The attendant pursed his lips disapprovingly.

"A concerned friend of the family," Troy added, trying to amend his story. "We met at the Sonesta bar and—"

The man cleared his throat. "I'm quite sure it's none of my business, sir."

Thankfully, the elevator whooshed to a stop and the doors slid open. Unlike most elevators, this one didn't empty into a hallway or lobby; it opened right into the penthouse apartment.

Troy stuffed his hand into his pocket, pulled out a crumpled dollar bill, and shoved it into the monkey grinder's gloved hand.

"Thanks for the lift, brother," Troy said, and smiled.

The man held the dollar in between two fingers like a dirty tissue. "Quite unnecessary, sir."

"I insist," Troy said, beaming as the doors began to slide closed.

He turned around and stepped into the impressive residence. The floor was ridiculously shiny terrazzo marble that clicked slightly even under his sandaled feet. The expanse was unbelievably open. To his right sat a grouping of white leather couches and an immense flat screen television. The chachkies all looked like they'd been ordered to match from some ocean cottage catalog and the artwork looked original and expensive. Directly in front of him was a massive grand piano, glossy and black, and without a single fingerprint to be seen. There was an empty glass, still coated in condensation, sitting on the bench, and to the left of the piano was a small bar with a couple of bottles of brown liquor, a silver ice bucket with tongs sticking out of it, and a white towel with blue stripes folded and hanging from a hook on the side.

Farther left of that was a modern, open-plan kitchen with stainless appliances that looked like they belonged in a gourmet restaurant.

A glass wall behind completed the airy space, affording a darkening ocean view that was spectacular, almost dizzying.

Somewhere down the hall, Troy heard a toilet flush. He removed his hat and slicked his hair back with his hand.

The man, who had to be Jack Colpiller, strolled into the room, wringing his hands lightly to dry them. He wore a v-neck t-shirt, a pair of island red shorts, and Birkenstock sandals. He looked Troy up and down.

"Well," Jack asked, "what is it this time? Alternator? Fuel pump?"

Troy raised his eyebrows. "Beg your pardon, sir?"

"The Ferrari," Jack said as he walked toward the piano, "what's wrong with it?"

"Danged if I know, sir," Troy said, "I don't know anything about any Ferrari."

"You're not here about the car?"

"No, sir."

Jack Colpiller stopped rubbing his hands together and turned toward Troy. "Well, then," he asked, "who the hell are you?"

Troy inhaled deeply, mulling over the best way to put this whole situation into words. He decided on the straight-forward, simple approach. "I know your daughter, Mindy," he said, "and she has expressed a concern about the well-being of your other daughter, Caroline. And now, I'm worried that something has happened to Mindy."

Jack Colpiller sniffed and walked toward the piano where his drink was sitting. "Listen, Mr. um...?"

“Bodean,” Troy said, “but most of my friends just call me Troy.”

“Listen, Mr. *Bodean*,” —Jack emphasized the fact he wasn’t going to call him Troy— “my daughters, whom you say you know...”

“Well, I don’t know Caroline, exactly.”

“Of course you don’t,” Jack said, eyeing Troy up and down, and continued, “My daughters, good girls as they are, are given to flights of fancy from time to time.” He took his empty glass to the bar and filled it with some sort of brown whiskey. “Drink, Mr. Bodean?”

Troy shrugged. “Beer, if you got it.”

Jack nodded and pulled a bottle of Sam Adams from under the bar. He handed it to Troy with a bottle opener. “It isn’t chilled, but there are pint glasses in the freezer,” he said and gestured toward the refrigerator.

Troy walked into the kitchen. “Jack, I know that you—”

“Mr. Colpiller,” Jack corrected him.

Troy cleared his throat as he poured the beer into a cold glass. “Right, Mr. Colpiller,” he continued, “I know that you know your daughters better than I do, but I’m afraid that they’ve run afoul of a certain not-so-nice character named Taz.”

“Pfftt, the tennis pro?” Jack scoffed. “Nothing but a harmless flirt. They all are, you know?”

“Well, sir,” —Troy took a sip of his beer— “I don’t know about that, but I have run across several characters like him and it has never turned out well.”

Jack fell silent for a long moment, then said, “Mr. Bodean, I have things well in hand. I have the best investigator on the case and I’m sure things will be just fine. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

Troy drank the last of his beer in a big gulp. This wasn’t getting anywhere. He turned toward the elevator, mentally switching gears. He figured he would have to take care of this on his own.

As the doors slid open, Jack Colpiller’s cell phone rang. He answered it. “This is Jack.” His face went pale. “I’ll be right there.” He clicked his phone shut and looked over at Troy.

“It seems the Miami Police Department has found my daughter’s car. And they found blood in it.”

Troy stepped out of the elevator, his heart jumping in his throat.

“Blood? Which daughter?” he asked.

“Caroline.”

“Mr. Colpiller,” Troy said quietly, “I think we need to consider the real possibility that something very wrong is going on here. We need to move fast.”

Jack turned his glass of whiskey up and swallowed the rest. He reached into his pocket and tossed a jangling ring of keys to Troy, who caught them and raised an eyebrow.

"You'll have to drive, Mr. Bodean," Jack said, walking briskly to the elevator, "I've had a few too many drinks tonight."

"Yes, sir." Troy clicked through the keys. "Which car?"

"We'll take the Lambo." Jack punched the garage button as they entered the elevator. "The Ferrari's in the shop."

Troy raised his other eyebrow so they were both lifted in surprise. "You sure about that, Mr. Colpiller?"

"I'm certain," he said as they doors slid closed, "the Jag is much too slow. And call me Jack."

"You got it, Jack."

TROY GUNNED the bright yellow Lamborghini's accelerator and squealed out of the parking garage below the Grand Bay. The g-forces pushing him back in the driver's seat reminded him of the rush of taking off in an Apache, and he said as much out loud.

"You used to fly Apaches?" Jack Colpiller asked him in apparent surprise.

"Yup," Troy said, nodding, "back in Afghanistan."

"You should've told me you were a soldier," Jack said and clapped Troy's knee.

"Would it have made any difference?"

"None."

Troy smiled as they raced over the causeway toward Miami. The local police must've recognized Mr. Colpiller's car, because no one even gave them a second glance. *Privilege does indeed have its benefits*, Troy thought.

Jack Colpiller tapped a button on the radio—which looked more like a computer than a sound system—and spoke to the car.

"Call Mindy," he said.

The computer answered, "Calling Mindy."

The sound of a ringing phone filled the car. It rang three times and went to voicemail. He repeated the process for Caroline. Same thing. Both phones were off.

"It would be quite odd for both girls to be off the grid at the same time, wouldn't it, Troy?"

"Yes, sir," Troy agreed, "I do believe it would."

"I'm beginning to think you're right about this whole situation," Jack said, worry creeping into his voice.

"Whose blood did they find in the car?" Troy asked.

"Couldn't tell me on the phone," Jack answered, "but he said they got the hit from immigration."

"Taz," Troy said, "something's up with Taz."

"I do believe you're right, Mr. Bodean..." Jack's voice trailed off and he stared out the window at the street lights racing past.

“Call me Troy, Jack. And don’t worry about a thing. I’ve been through this all before and I think I know of a friend at the Miami P.D. who might be able to help out.”

“Well, then, Troy,” Jack said as he looked pointedly at him, “do you think you can stop driving like my mother?”

Troy turned back to the road and put the hammer down.

Scratch My Back

Adrian “Taz” Hull sat in the parking lot of the Liberty Square

apartment building where he’d had the run-in with Mr. Smith... or whoever the guy was that had been following him around. He had the man’s briefcase open in the passenger’s seat of the Ritz-Carlton maintenance truck next to him. He sifted through the papers again and had pieced together that the man was a private investigator, hired by Jack Colpiller, to find out what had happened to his daughter, Caroline.

“Good luck with that,” Taz said, and grinned.

In return for finding out what happened to Caroline Colpiller, the investigator would receive a payment of two-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars. Not too shabby. It was also apparent from the man’s notes that he was on Taz’s trail... hence the reason for following him around. As far as he could tell, the man had no real evidence on his involvement with the disappearance of Caroline, just a bunch of hunches.

However, it was the other stack of papers in the folder that had sparked an idea in Taz’s mind. An idea that might make Mr. Smith’s investigation of him go away. From what he could tell, the man was investigating some senator who’d been having an affair with, and had possibly murdered, some poor intern. It was a stack of evidence that Taz thought the man would pay dearly to get back.

He wasn’t sure exactly how to proceed, but he knew he needed to get Mr. Smith off his back. The investigator knew who he was, but he didn’t think he knew Taz was the one who had stolen the briefcase. It seemed as if maybe the best thing to do was knock on his door and let him know.

He got out of the truck and was immediately hit by a strong odor. A pungent, disgusting odor. Skunk. Someone had probably hit one on the road nearby... very close, apparently, as it stunk to high heaven.

“Geezus Croist,” Taz said, pinching his nose as he stepped into the elevator.

Riding up three levels trapped with that stench was almost enough to make him throw up... and it got worse when he stepped into the hall where Mr. Smith's apartment was. Okay, maybe the skunk had died in the building somehow...

Taz's eyes watered as he approached the door where he'd fled from the man. The skunk had definitely died in Mr. Smith's apartment. He could barely , and the urge to vomit grew progressively stronger. He knocked on the door and waited. Nothing.

"Fookin' A," Taz said, knocking more urgently, "open a damn window or somethin'."

His stomach churned hard and he couldn't keep it down any longer, retching all over the door... three times. Vomit trailed down the door and onto the carpet. He knocked violently, until an old lady stuck her head out the door from across the hall. Her nose was literally held shut with a clothespin.

"He ain't home, damn ya," she growled. "Now get out of here."

Taz opened his mouth to reply, but was afraid more vomit would spew forth. He flipped her the bird and jogged to the elevator. The smell grew progressively weaker as he rode down, and when he got back into his truck, he turned the air conditioner on high. He wiped his forehead and breathed slowly to gain his composure. He thought about simply waiting there until Mr. Smith returned, but he had to get away from the smell. He needed something to drink to wash the barf from his mouth, too. Over above the next building, he saw a sign that read, Pollo Tropical.

"Perfect." He wiped his chin on his sleeve and pulled the truck out onto the road.

Slowly, the smell began to weaken enough that he felt better. He pictured himself smashing the old lady's face and taking her clothespin next time. He couldn't help but smile as the restaurant came into view.



REMINGTON HOYT REGINALD sat in a booth sipping an ice-cold unsweetened mango tea. He chose a seat near the back of the restaurant, away from the bathroom and the front registers. He could see two of the doors where Dickerson might come in, but was sat behind a short wall covered in pictures of chickens; hard to spot, unless you were looking specifically for him. As he sat there contemplating exactly what he would ask for in return for burying this explosive evidence against Governor-elect Gil Dickerson, two haggard looking women stumbled into the restaurant with a two-year old child in tow. Cute kid, dark curly hair, blue eyes, but the two women

looked like they'd been in the sun a little too long and perhaps had one too many cigarettes. Leathery was the best word he could think of to describe them.

"I'll get whatever I dang well please, Ellie Mae," one of them shouted as they entered.

"Now, Daisy Mae, you know you can't get nothin' with too much caffeine in it since yer still breast feedin' little Troy," the second girl said.

The little boy looked from one woman to the other, smiling, and oblivious to the fact they were clearly not interested in his opinion on the subject.

"Oh, c'mon now," the girl called Daisy Mae protested, "he won't care none at all."

"You're a terrible mother," Ellie Mae said, and sneered at her.

As if on cue, the two women started smacking each other. Bleach blonde hair flew in all directions as they grunted and fought. The boy just stood by quietly as they pushed and shoved each other.

Remington wondered if there was a father figure in the boy's life or if, God forbid, these two cackling hens were all he had. But then again, not all father figures were that great anyway. His own dad wasn't exactly a saint... except to the tens of thousands of people who supported his ministry with tithes and offerings every single week. Good old Brant Reginald of the Heavenly Father's Holy Sanctuary Church of Fairhope, Alabama. A son of God indeed, and father of Remington... the black sheep of the Reginald family.

Remington was snapped out of his daze when the two Daisy-Duke wearing women and their cute little boy plopped down into the booth right beside him.

"Ellie Mae!" Daisy Mae nearly shouted. "You farted!"

"Why, hell no, I did no such thing!" Daisy Mae shot back.

The first woman stuck her nose in the air, looking like a mangy yellow lab. She sniffed for a second and then shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said, passing out bags of food, "you sho' do smell like one."

"Shut up, Ellie Mae."

Remington gave a light sniff of his shoulder. He knew the women could smell the skunk on his clothes. He had doused himself in cologne and fabric refresher, hoping to control the odor. It didn't take much to become desensitized when you'd been sitting in the strong rankness of his apartment. He shrugged it off.

At that exact moment, Senator—or rather, Governor-elect—Gil Dickerson walked into the Pollo Tropical.

Are you freakin' kidding me, Remington thought, and shrugged as Gil shot him a questioning glance upon seeing the boisterous trio

sitting in the next booth.

He quietly slid into the seat across from Remington, and steepled his hands in front of him on the table. He sniffed, adjusted his tie, and spoke softly.

“Okay, Mr. Reginald,” he said, “I’m here. I came alone. Let’s hear what you have to say.”

Remington leaned to one side, eyeing the group in the next booth. “Not yet,” he said and nodded toward the commotion.

Gil sniffed again. “I suppose I’ll get a drink then. What do you recommend?”

“Mango tea, unsweetened.”

“Fine,” he said, getting up and walking to the counter.

Remington had never seen a movie star or a rock star in person, but when Gil Dickerson walked up to order his tea, the response from the proletariat was insane. Workers, customers and loiterers were all scrambling around just to shake his hand and tell them how happy they were to vote for him. It was eye-opening. He kissed babies, he kissed grandmothers, he shook hands with veterans... the man had a gift. He wondered what kind of father Gil Dickerson was, but then he remembered the man was a murderer. After the manager of the store insisted Governor-elect Dickerson would absolutely *not* pay for tea in this store, he shooed his people back to work and told them to leave the man alone. He was obviously a *man of the people* to come down here and eat at the Pollo Tropical.

Gil slumped down into the booth. He glanced over his shoulder to confirm that the two women and child were still sitting in the booth behind them, and sipped his tea quietly.

“They love you,” Remington said.

“Mmhmm,” Gil replied.

“You could’ve had it all.”

The Governor-elect of Florida froze. Remington knew it was a passive threat, stated to imply that the man *wouldn’t* have it all.

He let the silence—or rather, the silence at their table—hang between them. He wanted Gil Dickerson to realize the power that he had over him. He could end the man. For the first time in his life, he was the one with the power.

“Mama, we go see Mickey?” said the child sitting in the next booth, breaking through the din.

Remington was absolutely certain an immediate rebuke would be coming from the two women he was unfortunately sitting with... but it didn’t.

“Oh, that’s a great idea, Lil T,” said Daisy Mae, “donchu think so Ellie Mae?”

“We would have so much fun!” Ellie Mae agreed.

"If you finish off them fries, we'll go right now," said Daisy Mae. "It's a big place, and you'll git hungry walkin' round thar."

"Yayyy, Mama!" The little boy was ecstatic, jumping up and down in his seat and shoving fries into his mouth.

Remington couldn't help but smile. He wanted to go too. The great Brant Reginald would never take him to a place like Disney World. Too many sinful things happened there. Gram would've taken him... if his father would've allowed it... but no. He watched longingly as the three of them shoved their trash into a nearby can, filled their soda cups to the limit, and skipped out the door.

"Finally," Gil Dickerson grunted. "Now, let's get down to business. What exactly is it that you think you know and what the hell does it have to do with me?"

Remington inhaled deeply. Here we go. Crossing the Rubicon metaphorically.

"Chief of Staff," he said simply and sipped his tea.

"Beg pardon?"

"When you're elected, you will appoint me your chief of staff," Remington said matter-of-factly.

Gil Dickerson leaned his head back and roared with laughter. Some of the patrons even glanced in his direction it was so loud.

"Now, that my boy, is a hoot," Gil said and slapped the table. "I can't even tell you how much I needed that laugh."

Remington picked up a folder from the seat beside him and slid it across the table. Gil Dickerson sucked his teeth and opened it. His expression wavered a little, but then turned to stone as he looked over the papers inside the folder.

"Her name was Jackie Ranchero-Doral," Remington said, as the Governor-elect flipped to an 8x10 photograph of the girl, "and her husband hired me to find out if she was having an affair, and if so, who with."

"Okay," Gil said slowly, "and what does this have to do with me?"

Remington slid a large envelope onto the table. Gil opened it and pulled the corner of some photographs out of the envelope a little, and then shoved them back in.

"These photographs, which, of course, are duplicated and stored in a safe location, show exactly what it has to do with you." Remington felt his pulse quickening as his palms started sweating.

Gil Dickerson stiffened and blustered. "That girl is nothing but a whore and a liar," he growled, "telling stories in the hopes that it will further her political career."

"Seems nothing will be furthering her *anything* at this point," Remington shot back, "since you left her at the bottom of Lake Okeechobee."

A flicker of panic raced across the senator's face, but disappeared as quickly as it came. His responses led Remington to believe he'd been coached on how to deal with this situation. Deny that the girl was dead... at least until there was actual proof of it... which technically, Remington didn't have.

Gil leaned over the table and whispered harshly at Remington. "Mr. Reginald, you are playing in waters much deeper than those at Canal Point right now. You have nothing but pictures of a senator enjoying time with his intern. Okay, *maybe* call it an affair. I'll still be elected. Hell, Clinton was a damn hero after fooling around with old what's-her-name-inski."

Remington inhaled deeply. He decided to go all in. He'd never been a good at poker, but he knew the stakes had to be higher to have any shot at beating the best players.

He took a small baggie from his pocket. It contained two teeth and a white cloth with blood on it. He laid it on the table and pushed it toward the senator.

Gil Dickerson's face went alabaster white, and the straw from his mango tea hung on his lower lip. His eyes went slack and his shoulders slumped. The lab had not been able to match the teeth or the blood to Jackie Ranchero-Doral, or anyone else for that matter. Remington had suggested that they check the results against anything they could find on her, but her records had been sealed... conveniently. He suspected that someone in the shady circle of power grooming Gil Dickerson for a presidential run had something to do with that. He decided to bluff that hand.

"We both know what you've done," Remington said and leaned forward, matching the senator's whisper. "Eventually, they'll find her body. Might not be today, might not be tomorrow, but someday. Will you be in the White House when that happens? Who knows? Will a lowly little private investigator from Hialeah, Florida, leak photographs of you with her on a boat at Canal Point? Will that same P.I. come up with blood and teeth that will match the body that were found on the boat that you both were on at Canal Point?"

He paused to let all of that sink in. It was a damning trail. A trail that started with the body... a body that Remington never saw... she was alive and well in the last picture he took of them. But she never came back to shore, and Gil returned alone. Remington had pictures of that too.

"None of this ever has to come out," he said, and leaned back and pulled the baggie off the table, shoving it into his pocket.

Gil's hand shook slightly on his cup. He steadied it and sipped the last of his tea.

"It is really good tea, isn't it?" he said.

Remington nodded and took a sip of his.

Gil Dickerson stood, buttoned his suit jacket, and extended his hand toward Remington.

He took the Governor-elect's hand and shook it.

"I'll draft the announcement of your appointment tomorrow," Gil said. "When the election is over, give me a week to start the transition. I'll announce your appointment then."

"Perfect." Remington fought to contain his excitement that his play had worked.

He was going to be the freaking Chief of Staff to the Governor of Florida. Take that, Dad!

Gil turned away from him and walked to the door. He pushed it open slightly, but looked back at Remington.

"Oh, but take a goddamn shower, man," he said. "You smell like a damn skunk."

Remington swallowed and nodded his head. When Gil was gone, he sat in silence, barely able to keep himself from grinning like an idiot. He decided to celebrate by getting a large mango tea to go. He'd definitely spend a few minutes in Gram's room when he got home—His thought was interrupted by the memory of the skunk. He checked his phone... nothing from animal control. He dialed again and got what sounded like a part-time employee who knew nothing about nothing. She took his name and number and said the techs would call him back.

He got into his car and pulled out. Maybe, if he was lucky, the skunk would've found a way to get out and would be gone when he got home. He didn't care. In a month or two, when he took over his new office, he'd be moving out of that crap-hole anyway. He lowered the windows and cranked the A.C. Geezus, the smell was still so strong.

He was so distracted that he never saw the Ritz-Carlton maintenance truck pull out of the parking lot behind him.

Whadda Ya Know, Joe?

Troy Bodean and Jack Colpiller sat in the Miami Police

Department waiting area. The seats were rigid plastic half-egg shapes with metal legs—middle school style contraptions that seemed more appropriate for the Spanish Inquisition than a classroom.

Detective Joe Bond walked into the room with his hand outstretched and a huge smile on his face. “Now, there’s a face I never thought I’d see again,” he said and practically jerked Troy out of his seat, wrapping him in a bear hug.

Troy thought Joe looked good. His skin was tan and taut, his desk-cop paunch was a little smaller, his eyes were bright, and his shoulders were pulled back. In short, he looked nothing like the burned-out NYPD—and then Key West—cop, that Troy had met a few years ago.

“Joe,” Troy said, smiling back at him, “you look good... dang good! What’s up with that?”

“Here,” he said, motioning him toward his office, “let’s step in here.”

“Oh, um,” —Troy looked back at Jack— “and this is Mr. Colpiller. The father of the girl whose car you’ve got.”

Joe reached is hand out to Jack. “Right, right. Come on in, sir. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Jack Colpiller shook Joe’s hand and they all scooted around the array of steel desks toward his office. He motioned for the two men to sit. The chairs were old steel and covered with faux leather, but at least they were cushioned. Troy sat and rubbed his knee. Sitting too long was the worst on his old injury.

The office was decorated in typical cop décor; a few medals here, a couple of certificates there, pictures of Joe with other cops, and all that jazz. Troy spotted a picture on his desk of Joe standing next to R.B.—Troy’s brother, Ryan Bodean—on the floats of Gidget. Gidget was the seaplane of R.B.’s flying ferry business out to Fort Jefferson in the Keys.

Troy pointed at it. "So, what gives? Why'd you leave all that to come back to this?"

"Well, hell, you know as well as I do that it was paradise," —the detective leaned back in his squeaky chair— "but I found that sitting in the cockpit of the plane for more than thirty minutes aggravated my back."

He turned toward Jack, seeing that the man was completely out of the loop of the story.

"Had a bullet near my spine from an old NYPD shootout," he said.

Jack nodded.

"But anyway," Joe said, and turned back toward Troy, "I just couldn't do it. Your brother was amazing, by the way. Helped me get hooked back up with this job." He leaned forward and turned a picture frame around to face the two men. "And that's when I met Olga."

The picture showed Joe lying in a hospital bed with a beautiful blonde nurse leaning over kissing him on the cheek. "The pain in my back got worse and worse," Joe said, absentmindedly rubbing his leg, "shootin' down into my legs. I don't know, maybe somehow all those hours cramped up in the plane dislodged the bullet or something, but it got to where I couldn't sit, I couldn't stand, and I sure as hell couldn't lay down."

"Geezus, man," Troy said, whistling, "what'd you do?"

"Hell, I got a consult from a doc here in Miami," —Joe clicked his tongue— "said he could get the bullet out, and there was a chance it would paralyze me."

Jack Colpiller grunted. "Damn."

"You're telling me." Joe nodded toward him. "But I was in such pain, you just wouldn't believe it. And I hadn't slept in weeks. I checked into the hospital, thinking I may never check out again." Joe's voice cracked slightly, and he took a moment to regain his composure.

"After the surgery, I woke up to the face of an angel. Olga Nielsen, my recovery nurse." He traced his finger on the picture frame as he spoke. "I woke up fine. No paralysis and no pain. It was a miracle. For two weeks though, I was rehabbing in the capable arms of Olga. When I went in for my last session, I asked her out on a date. The rest is history."

"Hot dang, man," Troy said, slapping his knee, "that's one hell of a story!"

"All true, my friend," Joe said, smiling widely.

Jack Colpiller cleared his throat. "I appreciate the catching up and all, I really do, but is it possible that we could move on to my daughters?"

“Oh, wow, Mr. Colpiller,” Joe said, “I am so sorry.”

Joe pulled a folder out of his desk drawer and opened it in front of them. There were several pictures of the car with numbered evidence cards positioned in various places of interest. Beneath that was a sheet clearly showing a D.N.A. test. There was also a set of keys in a baggie, and shockingly, another containing a cell phone.

“We found the car parked in a nightclub parking lot. It had not been valeted. It was in perfect condition, meaning, it hadn’t been vandalized or broken in to. The keys were under the driver’s seat and the car was unlocked when we found it.”

Joe read the report, then looked up at Jack Colpiller. “We found a trace amount of blood on the steering wheel.”

Jack leaned forward and started to speak. “I—”

“Some of it matched a man named Adrian Hull,” Joe cut him off, “an immigrant from New Zealand. We also found secondary blood... but we couldn’t get a match on it.”

The revelation sat heavy in the air.

“So we’ll need a D.N.A. swab from you, Mr. Colpiller.”

“Of course. But who the hell is Adrian Hull?” Jack asked, “and why the hell was he in my daughter’s car?”

Joe shuffled a couple of papers. “He is employed at the... Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden of Key Biscayne. According to his employee file, he listed his home as Tasmania.”

“Taz,” Troy said, the information clicking into his brain.

“Beg pardon?” Joe asked.

“He goes by Taz,” Troy said, “a nickname maybe from bein’ Tasmanian, the ol’ devil.”

Troy smiled and looked up, expecting a response to the Looney Tunes reference. He got nothing, so he let it drop.

Joe scribbled a note on the report. “We’ll want to talk to this guy. We called the Ritz, but they don’t have anything—or at least that’s what the girl said on the phone. He may not have been able to rent an apartment or get a phone in his name, since he was moving from overseas when he applied for the job. You know of his whereabouts?”

“He was supposed to have a tennis lesson with Mindy—the other Colpiller twin—tonight,” Troy said, “but, I went down to the Tennis Garden and there was no sign of either of them.”

A sense of dread settled quietly in the room. First Caroline had gone missing, and now Mindy. And seemingly at the center of it all was this joker named Taz. And now he was gone too.

“May I see my daughter’s phone?” Jack asked.

Joe pulled a pair of latex gloves from his desk. “Put these on please.”

Jack complied and Joe handed him the phone. Jack clicked the

power button and the phone flashed to life. He entered a passcode and looked up at the two men.

"I paid for the phones and the service," he said. "I know the codes."

Troy raised an eyebrow.

Jack clicked a few times, then turned the phone to face Joe. "This must be it," he said to the detective.

It was a text message thread from Taz to Caroline. Above it was a number. Joe scribbled it down. "Would you mind telling me the passcode so our forensic team can go through those messages?" Joe asked.

"It's her birthday. 0817."

"Thanks."

Jack handed the phone back to him and looked at Troy. "Seems like you were right about this Taz character."

Troy nodded. "Seems that way."

Joe pushed a button on his desk phone. "Cindy, can you get me the tracer?"

"Coming right up," a voice replied.

"Let's give this guy a call," Joe said. "He probably has a prepaid, burner type phone, so there won't be any way to get the tower pings quick enough. Luckily, I have friend pretty high up in the C.I.A. who set me up with a new GPS tracker toy. I'll have him on speaker, but I need to keep him on for at least a minute to get a trace." He looked at Jack and then at Troy. "No matter what he says," Joe said, "please don't speak. It's imperative that we locate him."

"Of course," Jack said, his eyes glazing over.

Troy could sense the man was terrified. He'd been convinced that his daughters were safe... off on rich girl adventures, soon to return home. But now that scenario had been replaced with a far darker one. One that didn't seem to have a happy ending.

A woman, presumably Cindy, walked in, carrying a machine that looked like an old reel-to-reel tape recorder, and handed it to Joe. The tracer.

"Thanks, Cindy," Joe said as he began connecting it to his desk phone.

"Mr. Colpiller," Troy said softly while Joe was busy hooking up the tracer, "this might be the time to bring up the investigator you hired. Any info is good info."

Jack nodded. "Detective," he said, and cleared his throat, "there is the matter of a private investigator that I hired to find my girls."

Joe tapped a finger on the top sheet of paper in the file. "Yes, a Mr. Remington Reginald?"

Jack cocked an eyebrow. "How do you know that?"

“It seems he was in contact with another detective here,” Joe said, “running the plates and trying to find your daughter’s car. But when we found the blood in the vehicle, the level of the case had to be raised to—” He stopped short.

“Raised to what?” Jack demanded.

“Well,” Joe said, scratching the back of his neck, “raised to homicide.”

“Dangit,” Troy muttered.

Turnabout

Taz sipped his drink from the Pollo Tropical and was finally

feeling normal again after his vomitous run-in with the foul smell in Mr. Smith's apartment. Bizarrely enough, he'd been in the drive-through at the fast-food place when Mr. Smith drove right up, got out of the car, and walked inside. He parked across the lot from the man's car, slumped down inside his truck, drank his soda, and waited.

He was inside for at least an hour, but finally exited in a rush. He jumped in his car and Taz followed. His heart sank a little when he realized the man was headed back to his apartment. He parked and watched him go inside, then gave him fifteen minutes to get to his apartment and get settled in.

When he was sure enough time had passed, he opened the glove box and found a red bandana crumpled up inside. It smelled of sweat, but he didn't care—it would be better than the skunk smell by a long shot. He tied it ninja style around his face, covering his nose and mouth. Exiting his car, the smell hit him like a slap to the face again, but it wasn't nearly as bad with the bandana on. He walked to the elevator, took a deep breath, gagged a little, and punched the button for the third floor.

Knocking on the door, he tried hard not to inhale the smell still lingering there, but the bandana helped a bit. The vomit stains were still on the door. He listened for sounds of Mr. Smith moving around inside, but heard nothing. He knocked again. Still nothing.

He positioned his ear against the door and listened closely to the tinny sounds of music that now drifted out of the apartment. Mr. Smith was obviously listening to it, and apparently couldn't hear the knocking.

Taz reached down and turned the knob. Locked. He pulled his pocket knife out, shoved it into the door jamb where the lock was, and pushed hard with his shoulder. Surprisingly, the door swung open easily. *Cheap ass apartment*, Taz thought. The inside was just as he remembered it. The kitchen table had a few papers spread out over it,

likely those that had spilled out of the briefcase when he'd run down the hall. A fan sat in the open sliding doorway out to the balcony, expelling the awful smell. It was definitely skunk. Taz thought he must be getting desensitized to the smell, or maybe it was actually getting better. Either way, he was able to proceed in without blowing chunks.

He walked over to the kitchen table and scanned the papers stacked in neat little piles. Some were about his case and some were about the other case—the senator who maybe killed an intern, or something like that. He picked up the sheets about him and stuffed them into his pockets. Evidence was easy to get rid of, but this was about a payday now. He was looking to take a cool two-hundred and fifty-thousand from Mr. Smith. After that, maybe Mexico or somewhere. He'd never have to hit another damn tennis ball again.

The music drifted from the door to his right and he thought he might've heard Mr. Smith humming along with it. It was the same door the man had been behind when he broke in before. *Ugh, I hate classical music.*

He inhaled as deeply as he could to steady himself, regretted it immediately, then walked to the door. It appeared to be closed but not latched completely. Mr. Smith had clearly been in a rush. He put his fingers against it and pushed softly. The door swung open soundlessly, revealing one of the most bizarre scenes he'd ever witnessed.



BRANT REGINALD, of the Heavenly Father's Holy Sanctuary Church of Fairhope, Alabama had his palm pressed against the forehead of a young man seated in a wheelchair. Sweat beaded under his eyes from the exertion he felt as he prayed... or maybe it was from the hot studio lights blasting down on them.

He spoke earnestly and with vehemence, emphasizing every other word in an almost hypnotic trance. His lilting Alabaman accent had the effect of rising and falling waves pushing power out from his mouth.

"Turnabout, demon," he belted out before the crowd of two-hundred in the studio audience, "turnabout and be gone. This man is a child of God, and has confessed to all his sins and repented in the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is under your purview no more. Turnabout and be gone!"

Turnabout was his signature phrase. He wasn't sure when it had become so associated with him, but he used it every week now, and it certainly seemed to give the demons pause and blast them right out of his sinning and broken audience.

The young man in the wheelchair was rocking back and forth, swaying with the power of God. *His acting is brilliant*, Brant thought to himself. In a few months, they'd have to find a way to get this kid back on the show.

The production of this segment of the show was also excellent. In the booth, Ricky Seamus had his hand on the dial controlling the house lights. He pulsed them ever so slightly, matching the waves in Brant's voice. The kid in the chair had worked with Ricky on exactly *when* the healing moment would occur, and the lights would match the "sacred" moment perfectly.

Brant was holding the crowd in his palms, as well as the kid's forehead, and knew exactly how to work the scene for maximum effect. The kid would know to jump up and *be healed* when Brant gave him a squeeze on his temples. The studio audience was breathless. They hung on the edge of their seats, and the thundering echo of Brant's words—augmented by a few digital effects in his mic—were the only sound in the hall.

His voice rose. "It is time, in the name of the Heavenly Father's Holy Sanctuary, for you to get out, demon! Turnabout, and BE GONE!!!"

As he boomed the last words, he squeezed the kid's forehead. The young man burst up out of the wheelchair, and stood with his back arched as the house lights went bright white. The effect was awesome. Even Brant felt a tremor inside his heart. The Lord was truly in this place... even if a little Hollywood magic was required to help Him show up. He whipped up a few dramatic yet subtle tears as ushers came forward to *help* the boy down the stairs and clear the wheelchair from the stage.

Brant Reginald turned toward the camera. He was nearing sixty, slightly overweight—an ex-football player kind of overweight. His eyes were brilliantly blue, and his hair was salt-and-pepper gray, giving him the gravitas of an old biblical shepherd. Tan makeup enhanced his own natural tan, and helped to even out his sunglasses raccoon eyes—from the golf course.

He used to wear a robe on stage, but the new-age of the church didn't require such formality. Nowadays he wore short-sleeved Columbia PFG fishing shirts and occasionally his favorite Tommy Bahama silk shirts. Both were infinitely more comfortable under the glaring stage lighting.

In his pocket he kept a handkerchief, tucked away to wipe his brow in particularly sweaty moments, but he never let the crowd see him do it. He timed it perfectly with prayers, soloist performances, and naturally, commercial breaks.

"Friends," he spoke in earnest, "we have witnessed another

miracle. In the most concrete of ways, our Lord has made Himself known. The work of the Heavenly Father's Holy Sanctuary Church of Fairhope, Alabama, *must* go on."

He thought back to the business meeting on Monday, with his accountant showing him a lot of red numbers. Too much money spent on television production, and not enough coming in.

"And friends," he continued, staring deeply into the camera, "we need your help to keep our church open. This sanctuary is God's house, and God has shown us that where we are gathered, there He will be."

The music began to play softly beneath his words, hymn-like and emotional. The choir stood behind him. As the music grew stronger, so did his words.

"Do you need a miracle, friends?" he said and took a step toward the camera. "It is written that God will bless those who give freely. Don't keep that of which God has given you stewardship away from Him. It is His to do with what He will. Blessings will flow to you if you only allow Him to use your gift."

The choir began to sing, and he raised his voice over them.

"As we close out this morning's glorious service," he said, motioning with his hands, "the alter will be open. There are ushers on both sides to receive the gift you choose to bring. Come now."

He folded his hands together, looked toward the ceiling, and mouthed a few private words for himself, and then walked off the stage.

The crowd surged forward, and he was certain the accountant would be happy with today's offering. He shut the door of his office behind him, wiped the sheen of sweat off his face, and knelt.

"Father, forgive me for what I have done," he prayed, "but a sin of deception for the greater good seems alright with me. If you deem my work to be false and unworthy, please give me a sign and take it from me."

He rose slowly. He knew he had about fifteen minutes to catch his breath before the next service. The staff would have everything reset on stage. He glanced at his notes about the upcoming *miracle*; a young blonde mother with breast cancer. There was a picture of the actress. *Nice, Brant thought, wholesome but hot, the girl next door, but maybe a little sex-kitten sprinkled in.* And a perfect situation. Nothing that the audience could actually see... his acting would carry it all.

His phone rang.

"Yeah," he said into the receiver.

"Great haul this morning, Brant," said the head usher, beaming, "we topped the last record by double."

"Thanks, Stephen," he answered, "God bless."

“God bless, indeed,” Stephen said, and hung up.

Another good show today and that red ink would be a thing of the past. And that’s when his whole world turned upside down.

The hefty knock on his door sounded urgent and official. It was unusual for anyone to disturb him during the brief break he had between services. He squashed his annoyance and tucked away the folder of notes for the next miracle he would perform.

“Yes,” he said to the door with a smile in his voice, “come on in.”

The door swung open quickly and he was immediately struck by the gruff nature of the man in the black suit. He didn’t smile, he didn’t introduce himself... he didn’t even bat an eyelash. What he did do was walk across the carpet and slap a piece of paper on the desk. He held his fingertips on it and waited until Brant looked up at him.

“What’s this all about?” the pastor asked, eyebrows furrowing.

“Cease and desist,” the man said flatly as he let go of the paper.

“Excuse me?” Brant pulled his reading glasses from the middle drawer of his desk and examined the paper.

“Your church, its employees,” —the man pointed a finger at him— “and you, are ordered by the court of Alabama to cease and desist all activities claiming to be religious miracles.”

Brant’s mouth opened slightly as he read the court order. “But the work of God—” he started.

“Has been faked in this building for the last fifteen years,” the man finished.

“It has been no such thing!” Brant pulled his glasses off. “This is a clear and simple violation of my first amendment rights! Freedom of religion, sir. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?”

“In 1982 a young woman came to you for a miracle,” the man said, and pulled a picture out of his pocket and laid it on the desk, “and you kindly obliged. You waved your hands around, said some words, and proclaimed her healed.”

Brant looked at the picture. He recognized the woman immediately.

“She left this place and stopped all of her medical treatments, believing that the power of God had healed her,” the man continued, “but it hadn’t... had it?”

“God’s plans are not always understood by His people,” Brant said weakly.

“It would’ve been one thing had you just been wrong about her physical well-being, but it was quite another to coerce this woman to send you all of her remaining life savings as a donation for the so-called miracle you performed.”

“Now, you see here,” Brant said, standing, “there was no coercion at all. That woman was free to send us whatever she wanted, and it

just so happened that she did. I had nothing to do—”

The man interrupted him. “Before she died, she went on record saying that she had been convinced by members of your church, including you, that if she didn’t send the money, the miracle could be reversed.”

“That is absolutely not true,” Brant said, defending himself. “And besides that, all of that is mere hearsay.”

“Perhaps,” the man said, shrugging, “but when you combine it with the affidavits of three actors whom you hired in the past to act out miracle healings, it doesn’t look good. Does it, Mr. Reginald.”

Brant swallowed. It was bound to happen. The church paid the actors well and had them sign contracts saying they would keep their mouths shut. He knew they were taking monumental risks. But it was for the greater good.

“What are the terms of the order?” Brant slumped back into his chair.

“You and all the board of directors of the church will resign. The United Methodist Church has already signed your defrocking papers. The television station just confirmed that the broadcast of the Heavenly Father’s Holy Sanctuary Church of Fairhope, Alabama, is officially canceled. You are finished.”

The man walked across the plush carpet and stood in the doorway.

“The church will be allowed to remain open, but under entirely new leadership,” he said as he pulled the door, “and who knows, maybe this time they’ll get an honest preacher.”

He slammed the door, leaving Brant alone. Dreadfully alone. The shock rolled over him in waves, and tears rolled down his cheeks as he fell to his knees.

“Father,” he said, clutching his hands together, “why hast thou forsaken me?”

But he knew the answer to his question. He was being tested. Much like the early Christians being thrown into cells, locked in chains, and fed to the lions, Brant Reginald had finally gotten the attention of God. He convinced himself it wasn’t the end, but merely a new beginning. He pulled himself up and sat back in his chair. Oddly, he felt the chains of oppression being lifted from his shoulders. Light streamed through the windows of his office and he knew God was with him. What to do next? What now, Lord?

Penance. He picked up the photograph the man had left on his desk. Aliah Ranchero. He’d start by finding this woman’s family and begging for their forgiveness. Next, his attention turned to a photo on his desk, his estranged wife and son. His wife was long dead, taken by a drunk driver, but his son... he had driven his son away—furious that he wouldn’t repent for what he’d done.

He wondered what Remington was up to now and if he'd ever gotten right with God. Lord, the boy had always been a strange one, and the incident with Gram had certainly shoved him over the edge into a sinful nature. No matter. Brant's journey was one for his own sins, not the sins of his boy.

He picked up the phone and dialed the last number he had for his son.

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Troy Bodean couldn't stop the twitching in his legs while he watched Joe Bond set up the fancy tracking machine—which he revealed had been a gift from Chris Collins at the C.I.A. He didn't understand anything at all about the mumbo-jumbo Joe tried to explain to them about the machine, but he knew it could find Taz—if Taz answered his phone—and if he stayed on the line for longer than a minute. Jack Colpiller was pacing back and forth, alternately wringing his hands and chewing his lips. They were both anxious to figure out what their next move was going to be... and it all hinged on finding Taz.

Joe Bond punched in the number from the text messages they'd recovered from Caroline's phone. As they listened, the line connected and began to ring. Joe put his hand over the receiver to effectively mute the call, and nodded his head toward the tracing machine.

"It disguises the number so that he can't tell where we're calling from," he said. "It shows up as a pizza place on his end."

Joe put his mouth back to the receiver, and Troy decided he couldn't stand the waiting anymore. Ever since Afghanistan, he'd been about as non-confrontational as a man could get. He made eye-contact with Joe and mouthed the question, *Water?* Joe mouthed back, *Down the hall*. At that moment, the line picked up.

"G'day?" said the speaker on the other end.

"Ah, yes, sir." Joe tried to make his voice sound higher than usual. "This is Joe from Super Sid's Pizza Emporium. I'm your delivery driver and I need directions, please."

Taz was quiet for a second, but then answered. "Ah sure as shit dint order any pizza," he said gruffly, "and ah'm kinda busy right now, so—"

"Oh, um, sorry, but my manager says it's way over time and you can have it anyway," Joe said, shrugging to indicate he couldn't think of anything better to say. "Just tell me where to bring it."

Troy opened the office door as quietly as he could and stepped into

the hall. Before he closed it behind him, he heard Taz say, "Look 'ere, ya twit, I didn't order any fookin' pizza and I don't..."

Troy gently closed the door, missing the rest of the conversation. He hoped Joe could keep the kid on the line long enough for the machine to work its magic and get a location for Taz.

As he stepped into the hall, he noticed an odd collection of men walking single file past him. They all had dark hair, curly, and a little shorter than shoulder length. And they all had beards and blue eyes. It was like a convention of Troy wannabes parading past him in the police department. He nudged the last guy in line.

"Hey man," he said, "you know where the water fountain is in this place?"

The man looked down the hall toward where the convoy of *Troys* was heading. "It's down there, bro."

"Right on," Troy said and fell in behind them. "Thanks, man."

"You bet," the guy said. "You here for the lineup?"

"S'cuse me?" Troy asked.

"Peepin' Tom thing," he said, "down on Key Biscayne."

"I don't have a clue what—"

Troy was interrupted by a mean looking officer who stepped out of a room in front of the walking line of men.

"Shut it," he said, and waved the first man into a door to the left, "and get your butts in there."

Troy slowed to let the guys get a distance ahead of him. The officer cocked his head to the side and furrowed his eyebrows.

"You too, dude," he said, and waved harshly at Troy, "fall in."

"Oh, no, sir." Troy held up his hands. "I ain't no Peepin' Tom. I'm here with the other—"

"Yeah, right." The officer grabbed Troy by the arm. "That's what they all say. I'm innocent, I'm innocent. Get your ass in there."

"I think you've got a little mix up here, sir," Troy tried to protest, but the officer shoved him into the room and closed the door.

Troy heard the lock click behind them. Inside the long narrow room, the other guys were lining up along the wall to the left. On that wall were lines indicating height, and on the opposite wall was a mirror... obviously a two-way mirror with someone on the other side, hoping to pinpoint the South Beach Peeping Tom.

Troy walked up to the mirror and put his hands beside his eyes, peering into the glass. "I think there's been some kind of mistake here," he said, seeing nothing in the mirror but his own eyes. "I'm not here for a lineup."

"Against the wall, number five," a voice crackled through the loudspeaker, "or you'll be spending a night in a jail cell."

"Yeah, but—"

“Back it up, number four!”

Troy wasn't sure why he'd been dubbed number five, but then he looked at the other guys in line. They all had sheets of paper that had large numbers printed on them... one through four. He had no sheet of paper. Troy moved toward the door and as soon as his hand touched the knob, it jerked open and the mean looking police officer grabbed him by the arms, flipped him around backwards, and had him cuffed behind his back within seconds.

“Get in line now, number five!” he yelled at Troy, and shoved him back against the wall with the other four men.

He reached up and jerked the cowboy hat off of Troy's head, then walked out the door and slammed it behind him.

Number four looked at him with a grin. “Nice work, bro. Fight the po-leese.” He held up a fist, presumably to fist-bump Troy, but then realized Troy was now handcuffed, so, he bumped his shoulder.

“This is a load a crap,” Troy muttered, and backed up against the wall.

When they got situated into a reasonable line, the loudspeaker crackled again.

“Number one,” it said, “please step forward.”

The man took a step.

“Turn to your left.”

The man complied.

“Turn to your right.”

It was strange watching the reflection of the similar looking men watching the first guy go through the motions.

“Now,” the voice continued, “say the line.”

The first man held up a piece of paper and read it. “Show them to me. Oh, yes, Mrs. Morgenstern, show me those huge funbags,” he said flatly. “I'm gonna motorboat those beautiful balloons,”

Number three snickered, and predictably the voice in the speaker told him to shut his mouth.

Troy had started to laugh too, but when the name came, he froze. *Morgenstern. Morgenstern*, he repeated to himself, *why do I recognize that name?*

“Back in line, number one.”

This continued down the row, each man passing the script down. By the time it had reached Troy, he was sweating. The cop re-entered and took off the handcuffs.

Troy turned to him and started to ask about his hat, but the man looked meaner than before, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Step forward, number five.”

Troy stepped forward and shielded his eyes from the bright lights. “Um, respectfully speakin', sir or sirs, I ain't involved in this case.”

“Turn to the right.”

Troy turned and said, “It’s a case of mistaken identity. If you’ll just get Detective Joe Bond in here, he can clear all this up.”

“Turn to the left.”

Troy did as he was told, and said, “I’m not sure what the deal is, but if we can get Joe to come down for a sec, this’ll all be—”

“Read the line,” the voice interrupted.

Number four reached out, handing him the script. Troy held it in his left hand and stretched out his right, palm up. “But I don’t have anything to do with—”

The mean cop took a quick step toward him and drew his baton. “Read the damn line.”

Troy stepped backward from the cop. “I got it. Read the line.”

The cop grimaced at him and stepped back toward the door. Troy held up the paper, and as he read through it in his mind, it clicked. *Mrs. Morgenstern. Funbags. Beautiful Balloons. Dangit.* It was Billy, the security guard at the Tennis Garden, and Linda Morgenstern. His mouth went dry.

“Read the line, number five!”

Troy swallowed. “Can I get a lawyer.”



TAZ HUNG UP THE PHONE, trying to decide what was stranger; the delivery dude not taking no for an answer on bringing him a pizza he didn’t order, or the freak of nature sitting in front of him in the old lady’s nightgown, listening to classical music, stroking the back of a skunk like a cat with one hand, and clutching a small, white-faced doll in the other hand.

“So, we meet at last, Mr. Hull,” the man in the gown said. “What is it that I can do for you?”

Taz was still wearing the bandana to mask the smell of the skunk still heavy in the room, but it wasn’t doing much to help. He pulled the bandana down. “Money,” he said, “plain ‘n simple.”

“And why should I give you anything?” the man Taz knew as Mr. Smith asked, adding, with the hint of a smile on his lips, “I know what you’ve done. I’m the one with all the cards. I could have you in jail with a single call to the police.”

Taz thought for a second. It was a good question. He hadn’t really thought this through. He knew Smith had information about his own case, but he also had information about the senator’s case as well. And as he stood there, watching this strange man rock the baby doll and the skunk, the pieces clicked into place. He smiled. “Because,” Taz said through his teeth, “ah know what you’ve done too.”

The man's smile faltered a little, but he recovered quickly. "Which is?"

"You've struck a deal wif the devil, aintcha?" Taz asked rhetorically. "Ah watched ya meet with the good senator. I dunno what you asked for, but if you weren't blackmailing the man he'd be in jail by now."

"My business with the senator has absolutely nothing to do with you," Mr. Smith said, though he stopped rocking. "And that doesn't matter now anyway. That business has already been conducted."

"Conducted in private, yeah?" Taz said, grinning. "But what if it ain't private anymore?"

A flash of something crossed Mr. Smith's face, then disappeared.

"What if the information I got from your briefcase was leaked to the press?" Taz was proud of himself for keeping his momentum going. "Whatever deal you struck would be dissolved."

"Perhaps, yes," the man said flatly, "but I still wouldn't have any reason to give you any money, and all the more reason to hand over all the information I have on your case, and put you away forever."

Shit, Taz thought, that made a lot of sense. He began to form a new idea in his head. "Ah know you're onto something big," he said, gambling, "worth more than this money yor gettin' for the Colpiller thing. Am I right?"

"Go on," Smith said.

"You can still get what you want." Taz thought he was onto something. "If I get what I want, we can all get our happy ending."

Mr. Smith seemed to mull this over. He started rocking and stroking the skunk again. "What is it you want?" he asked.

Taz licked his lips. He had originally planned to ask for the whole two-hundred and fifty thousand, but now that he'd been countered, he thought half might be a good place to start. "One-twenty-five," he said.

Mr. Smith immediately started laughing. "Is that all?" He rocked forward and laid the skunk and the little doll into a nearby cradle.

The skunk walked around in two small circles and laid down, snuggling its nose into the doll.

"Croist!" Taz could smell the skunk stronger now. "How d'ya fookin' live wi' that thing?"

Smith looked down at the skunk and shrugged. "You get used to it. Now, are we talking small bills, cashier's check, Australian dollars?"

Taz was startled. Just like that, Mr. Smith was going to pay him.

"Of course," —he stood and took a step toward Taz— "I'll need to see the papers you have. All of them. Copies you might have made, everything."

"Ah dint make no copies," Taz said, "it's just your originals."

“Perfect.” Mr. Smith stuck out his hand. “Then I suppose once I know the details of your payment, we have a deal.”

Taz took his hand and shook it. “Thanks, Mr. Smith.”

“Call me Remington,” the man said.

“Yes sir, Mr. Remington.” Taz didn’t care that he was grinning from ear to ear. “Pleasure doin’ business wif ya.”

“Oh, by the way,” Remington said, “I’m going to need to know where the girl’s body is... you know, to make sure it doesn’t show up unexpectedly.”

Taz opened his mouth to tell him it was in the lighthouse, then shut it quickly. Shit! He’d forgotten Mindy was there too... and still alive.

“No worries, mate,” Taz said and smiled, “It ain’t gonna show up. Ah’ve taken good care of that.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“Good.”

He couldn’t help but wonder how Remington hadn’t found out about Mindy being kidnapped too... but he’d take care of her soon enough.

No worries.

Good Old Boys

Gil Dickerson rolled the cigar around in his mouth to moisten

the end. The peppery taste burned his lips in a good way, like a hot curry, or a chili pepper. He enjoyed spicy things, not unlike he'd enjoyed his time with Jackie Ranchero-Doral. But he'd always paid the price with indigestion that couldn't be helped with any over-the-counter medication. With food, he'd learned to be more discerning with his choices. He wondered if he'd ever get that way with his choice in women.

"Good afternoon, Gil," came a lilting Boston accent through the door.

James Hardy, senator from Vermont, walked in with his hand outstretched. "To what do I owe the pleasure of ya company this fine day?"

Gil stood, took his hand, and shook it. One pump. Let's get this thing started.

"Something's up, James," he said quietly. "I had a meeting with a little shit who apparently has some information on me, and—"

"That'll be enough, Governor Dickerson," James interrupted. He took a couple of glasses from a bookcase bar, clinked three ice cubes into each, and poured a dark liquor into them. He sat one of the glasses next to Gil. "Light?" he asked pulling a zippo lighter from his pocket.

"No thanks, Sandy can't stand the smell of them."

"Suit yaself," James shrugged, "but she's probably gonna smell mine on you anyway. Might as well enjoy it."

He took another cigar from the box on the table next to Gil. He sucked the end for a second and then clicked it off with a cutter. He pulled his thumb across the zippo and puffed four or five times until a thick, curling smoke came out of his mouth. He passed the cutter to Gil, along with the lighter.

"What the hell." Gil lit his cigar and took a sip of the whiskey. He puffed the cigar once and let the smoke ease out of his mouth. "Damn,

that's good," he said, and rolled the cigar between his thumb and forefinger. "What is it?"

"Don't ask, don't tell," James said, and winked, "but there's more where that came from."

Gil shrugged and took another puff.

"Now, tell me about this meeting of yours with this little piss ant."

Gil took a piece of paper from the pocket of his suit jacket. It was folded in thirds and printed on a stationary that indicated it came from the Governor of Florida's office. James Hardy laid his cigar down to smolder on a marble ashtray and stuck his hand out.

He unfolded the paper and read it, his lips moving slightly with each word. He looked up at Gil without moving his head. "And what, pray tell, is this?" James asked, holding the paper between his thumb and forefinger as if it were hot. "Some kind of joke?"

"I wish it were, James," Gil said, and shook his head.

"You're naming," —James looked at the paper— "whoever this Reginald character is, as your Chief of Staff?"

Gil nodded.

"Gil," James said incredulously, "what the hell is the meaning of this?"

The future governor of Florida leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. He rolled his lit cigar between his fingers and inhaled.

Gil proceeded to describe to James the meeting he'd had with Remington Hoyt Reginald at the Pollo Tropical. "He's got photographs of the two of us together on the boat."

"That boat doesn't exist anymore, Gil."

"Teeth, for Christ sakes, James," —Gil threw his hands up— "he's got frickin' teeth that I knocked out of her stupid head."

James Hardy's face grew dark. A glint appeared in his eye that Gil had only seen glimpses of before... and it scared him a little.

"Now, you listen to me, Guvna," —James's Bostonian accent was heavier now— "this piss ant ain't gonna get in the way of the office you were born to fill. And he sure as shit ain't gonna get in my way either."

"It's not a big deal," Gil protested weakly, "he'll just be my chief of staff for two years, then he's gone."

"Dammit, Gil!" James jumped up out of his chair. "That ain't the way it works up here. Once you're in, you're in for life. Everybody knows that."

Gil knew he was right. Power corrupted with deep roots in politics. Once a man had a taste, he could never go without. "Then, what do you propose we do about this?" Gil asked. "If he releases what he has on me, I'm finished. Caput. No Governor's mansion in Florida. No White House. No nothing!"

James Hardy put his cigar in his mouth and drew a long puff into his mouth. He let the smoke ease out and sat back down. "He has her teeth?"

Gil nodded. "And blood."

"How in the fu—" James started, but then stopped. "No, you know what? I don't want to know."

Gil raised his hands to retort, but James stopped him.

"Doesn't matter," James said quickly. "What matters is this isn't the kind of thing that a little discrediting won't fix, like it did with Anna Martinez."

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and clicked a number. Gil heard it ringing into his ear.

"What'd you say this guy's name is?"

"Remington Hoyt Reginald."

"Good." James held up a finger to his lips to indicate Gil should keep quiet. Someone had apparently picked up on the other end of the phone.

"Get me the snake." James listened for a few seconds, then clicked his phone off without a word. "It's taken care of," he told Gil, "now, clear your mind of it." He picked up the piece of paper and crumpled it into a ball.

"What's going to happen to him?" Gil asked, leaning back in his cushy, leather chair.

"The snake is what's going to happen to him," James said, and clicked open his zippo.

He tossed the document into his marble ashtray, flicked the zippo, and lit the corner of it. It flamed up, slowly at first, then quickly the fire burned it to ash.

"Now," James said, smiling, "let's talk about what the new draft of that announcement is going to look like."

Gil felt a shiver threaten to creep up his spine. This deal was getting worse with every passing day. He wondered if politics was really for him, and considered just dropping it all and walking away. But he was sure James Hardy would never let that happen. The boat would reappear, and the murder would be all over the papers. Gil would be in jail forever... if not sent to death row.

No, he'd made his bed. And he would damn well lie in it, flea infested as it was.



BRANT REGINALD HAD GOOGLED Aliah Ranchero and had found three-thousand two-hundred and forty results. After sifting through fourteen pages highlighting the famous Tex Mex chef, he found what

he was looking for... the obituary.

It was painful to see her grainy black and white photograph, but thankfully, the obit had left out the details involving the pain and drama that had played out after he *healed* her. He hadn't planned on extorting money from her, but she'd been so ecstatic about her new lease of life that she'd been easy to coerce into donating it all. And it had been a tidy sum... enough to complete the new television studio inside the church.

That's really when his ministry took off, and he knew deep down inside that he owed that legacy to her. Ironically, she had also been the hammer to bring it all down. And if he took that logic all the way to its conclusion, she was responsible for his new pilgrimage. He began to internalize and truly see his changed direction as his epiphany... his reconnection with God. And to show his gratitude, he would find her remaining kin and let them know that her life and eventual death had, in fact, come to serve a higher purpose.

He also learned in the obituary that Aliah was survived by her husband Manny and her daughter Jackie. Another quick search found the last white pages' listing for them in Alabama, and he dialed it. Disconnected. More digging revealed Manny had died of heart related stress, and that Jackie was living in Florida. She was some sort of political intern, bouncing from office to office under different candidates. Her last bounce landed her in the office of up-and-coming Senator, Gil Dickerson... soon to be Governor Dickerson, he read in the Miami Herald.

He dialed the office of Senator Dickerson, and got an unusual answer. Jackie is on leave, and unlikely to return before the election. *That's odd*, he thought. "I'm an old friend of the family," he added to no avail.

"I understand, sir," said the girl, presumably another intern, "but we wouldn't be able to give out any personal information anyway. But we thank you for your support in the upcoming election."

He Googled a little more to find information on Jackie's husband, and dialed him also. He was a little more forthcoming, though not exactly friendly. He shouted something about how her internships had wrecked their marriage and that she wasn't welcome back in his house. He'd slammed the phone down after that.

His next call was to Remington. Predictably, he got his son's voicemail.

"Son, it's your dad." He felt a lump forming in his throat. "I'm sorry. I know that doesn't mean much to you, but the Lord has changed my path. I hope you'll forgive me for all I have done to you. I'm no longer with the church in Alabama... actually, I'm no longer with the church at all. I've been defrocked."

He took a deep breath and realized tears were streaming down his face.

“God has given me a new direction,” he continued, “and I’m beginning my pilgrimage today. I will be starting my journey this afternoon. I don’t know where it will take me, but I do know that I’d like to see you.”

He felt a calming presence come over his body. The Lord was truly with him. He continued.

“If you hear this and if you’ll let me come—” His voice broke, and he paused. “If you’ll please let me come and see you, son. I love you.”

He hung up the phone. Composing himself, he figured the best course was to let God guide his steps. He knelt and prayed and waited. After a few minutes, his knees got sore, so he sat up in his chair. He clicked into his email and found that he still had access to the church email address. It couldn’t hurt to just see what was going on.

The first seven emails were hate mail directed both at him personally and at the church. The next two were threatening to sue. The tenth email was junk mail from Greyhound offering reward customers (the church used them to bus people in from all over the country) a free ticket to anywhere in the continental United States. There it was... his sign.

He printed the voucher and decided to walk to the bus station. He would take nothing with him from his past. He would be Job. He would leave his possessions behind—everything except his Bible—and follow Him. He walked out to the end of the church driveway and turned left toward the interstate. It was hot as hell, but he knew that was part of his penance, so he just kept walking.

As he took a few steps onto the ramp leading him to 98 South, a car honked behind him. He waved it around, but it pulled over in front of him and rolled the window down. A meaty, tattooed arm beckoned him.

Brant looked up at the sky... *Is this more of God’s handiwork?* He took a few steps toward the car—an older model white Buick LeSabre with peeling paint and a missing hubcap on the rear driver’s side wheel—and saw a faded and torn bumper sticker that read: *Jesus is my copilot.*

God does work in mysterious ways, he thought. The large man inside the car leaned over and opened the passenger door. Brant stuck his head down to look inside.

He was sweaty... like, are you sure you didn’t just step out of a shower, sweaty. His hair was salt and pepper—with more salt than pepper—and tied back in a long, stringy ponytail. His face was plump and his cheeks were rosy. It was hard to tell what his eyes looked like because they were hidden behind rose-colored glasses and large,

caterpillar eyebrows. The radio was blaring a song Brant recognized as *Me and Jesus* (Got Our Own Thing Going) as recorded by Sundance Head—the most recent winner on one of those TV music competition shows.

He was wearing a dingy wife-beater style tank top (also soaked with sweat) and what appeared to be multi-colored, tie-died swim trunks. On his chest dangled no less than three wooden cross pendants, all hanging on shoelaces or string. No gold or silver.

“Hello, friend,” he boomed in a voice that was somehow both high-pitched and resonant, “where you headed?”

Brant was about to politely decline the obvious invitation to share a ride and walk away, but if this wasn’t a sign from God, he wasn’t sure what was... He’d been asking for a sign, and the Lord had provided. So he stayed, and said, “Well, I’m just trying to get to the bus station over in Mobile for now. Florida from there.”

The man laughed, a boisterous, jolly laugh that Brant thought Santa Claus would laugh be proud of... if he were real. “Friend,” he smiled broadly, revealing surprisingly healthy-looking teeth, “you are in luck. I’m headed down to Lake Okeechobee to meet an old friend for an old-timey tent revival. You know, lots of singin’, lots of preachin’, lots of savin’. I can take you that far if you like.”

“I’m headed all the way down to Key Biscayne,” Brant said, “but Greyhound is actually pretty reasonab—”

The man interrupted him. “I’ll take you as far as you want to go with me and you can decide when we part ways. How does that sound?” He swept his hand over the passenger seat, brushing some random fast-food napkins, and the remnants of whatever meals he’d consumed recently, onto the floor.

Brant slid in beside the man. The seat was hot and sticky, but beggars can’t be choosers. He closed the door.

“Sounds like a fair deal to me,” he said, holding out his hand toward the man, “name’s Brant. Brant Reginald.”

The man’s eyes twinkled as he shook Brant’s hand. “Oh, I know who you are, Pastor Reginald.”

In almost any other circumstance, Brant might’ve felt a little creeped out by what the man had said... but he didn’t get that vibe from this guy. He seemed so... genuine... and nice.

“I’ve followed your messages on TV for quite a few years now,” he said, and pulled the car onto the ramp headed toward the interstate, “and I loved the series on David and Goliath. You really got that one right.”

“Thanks,” Brant said, settling in for the ride.

“Name’s Christopher,” he said as they got up to cruising speed, “Christopher Saint Juneau.”

“Pleased to meet you, Christopher,” Brant said, and felt himself smiling.

“Call me Chris,” he said, “all my friends call me Chris.”

Brant nodded. “You got it, Chris.”

“Oh, by the way,” —Chris jerked a knob on the dash back and forth— “the AC’s been out since Albuquerque. Hope you’ll be okay with that.”

“Fine with me,” Brant said, and felt sweat start beading on his forehead, “I’m just happy for the ride.”

“Cool,” Chris said and burst out laughing. “Or *not* cool, actually!”

He laughed until he started coughing, with tears forming in his eyes. It was an infectious laugh and soon Brant joined him. This was going to be an interesting trip for sure. He pulled his phone out of his pocket—no messages from Remington. Maybe a little prayer would help. He opened his Bible and started tracing his finger over a well-worn page in Acts.

“That’s a good one,” Chris said, “I always did like that one.”

“Me too.”

The song on the radio changed and Chris started singing along.

In his head, Brant did too. He always did like The Old Rugged Cross.

Dead Zone

When the shock of what had just happened slowly ebbed away, and the light of day began to stream into the lighthouse's windows, Mindy Colpiller began to assess her current situation. Her hands were bound with a shoestring, her mouth was covered with a strip of duct tape, and her throat was parched and dry. It was cool now in the early morning, but she knew as the sun rose higher that the window-surrounded room of the lighthouse would become a super-hot greenhouse. The windows were about six feet above the floor, so even when she stood up she couldn't see above the wall out to the ocean and the island behind. Her hands ached from being bound so tightly, and her lips were raw from rubbing up and down on the tape.

Exploring the room brought almost nothing of value. An old box marked OIL, a trap door style hatch that had no handle on the inside, and her. That was it. The room smelled awful and rank, like something rotting. She noticed that the smell seemed to be coming from the oil box, and thought maybe some left over fuel had gone bad, or a rat had died inside, or something like that—but the box looked new, likely a reproduction, with a brand-new Stanley padlock holding the lid tight.

Upon closer examination, she noticed that one of the hinges on the box's lid was slightly loose and a corner of it jutted out a little. Inspiration hit, and she crouched down, turning her back toward the loose hinge. She was able to feel for it and get it lined up with the shoelace holding her wrists together.

Slowly, she put the string against the bottom of the hinge, and jerked upward. It seemed to snap back against her wrist, but she couldn't tell if it was damaging it or not.

She continued pulling the string against the hinge, over and over again. It seemed like she'd worked for hours with no discernible result, but then she felt it... a small fray in the string. Strands were starting to come loose, and it gave her the incentive to keep working,

keep cutting, keep—

Suddenly the string snapped, and she tumbled backward over the box, pulling it over with her. The hinge broke loose from the lid and her hands were free. She tore the duct tape from her face, sat upright, and rubbed her red raw wrists gently, easing the circulation back into her fingers.

Immediately, she jumped over to the hatch in the floor. It was just a two-foot by two-foot opening with no handle on the inside. She tried desperately to get her fingers into the edge and pull up on it, but all she accomplished was demolishing her fingernails and causing her thumbs to bleed. She kicked hard on the trap door with one foot, and then jumped up and down on it with both feet... knowing that if it somehow broke loose, she could potentially go tumbling through and down the stairs of the lighthouse. But it would not give way. She was truly trapped.

Sweat had formed on her forehead and started to drip down her nose... the heat was coming. She followed the shadow around the room, sitting in the shade as the hours ticked by and her thirst grew.

Finally recovered from her exertion, she began to wonder about the only other contents of the room... the box. She noticed that the lid had opened slightly on the side where the hinge had fallen off. She also came to the conclusion that the box wasn't empty, as it hadn't sounded hollow when she tumbled over it.

She walked over to the box and tried to lift it back upright... it was really heavy. Definitely not empty. She tucked her sore fingers into the small crack by the broken hinge and pulled. It didn't give at all—the other hinge apparently strong enough to hold it closed. She tugged harder, wedging the broken hinge into the opening, but it still didn't budge.

"Dammit!" she called out to the empty room, and only an echo replied.

It was getting really hot now, so she shoved and heaved the box until it was closer to the wall and in the shade. She slumped down beside it and caught her breath. She needed to see inside that box. There might be something she could use to get the hell out of there. Her eyes lit on the hinge shining on the floor in the center of the room. She glanced back at the box and the remaining hinge. It was held on by three small slotted head screws. Inspiration hit again.

She almost dove toward the hinge on the floor, grabbed it, and ran back to the box. Turning it sideways gave her a small, flat edge that she could use as a makeshift screwdriver on the other hinge... but the screws were tight.

"Ugh," Mindy grunted, "of all the damn times for something to be well made."

She continued to work on the first screw, but then switched to the middle one. It turned. She turned it again and again, and finally it fell free and clinked to the floor. She wiped the sweat from her cheeks and started on the last screw.

A few minutes later, she sat as far away from the box as she could in the lighthouse, arms wrapped around her knees. The lid was wrenched open exposing the contents. Tears streamed down through the sweat and grime on her face. She'd found her twin sister.



WHEN THE LINE WENT DEAD, Joe Bond punched a button on the tracer machine, turning it off. He connected a USB cord to it and then to his laptop. He typed in a code that Chris Collins at the C.I.A. had given to him, and waited. A window opened in a browser and Joe watched as it connected to a database of information that was very likely classified. Then the tracer machine started to flash, and a sound that reminded Joe of an old telephone modem started beeping out of it.

Thousands of letters and numbers flashed across the screen like a scene from *The Matrix*, and Joe watched as it opened another window showing a map of the United States. The lines of code continued to scramble on the side while the map zoomed in, quicker at first, then slower and slower. It finally stopped at street level, and a flashing red dot appeared on the screen.

An apartment building in Liberty Square.

"That looks about right," Joe said out loud.

"Beg pardon?" Jack Colpiller was perched on the edge of his chair. "Did you find him?"

"We got him," Joe confirmed.

He pushed a button and his printer whirled to life. It soon spat out a sheet of paper, and Joe grabbed it.

Jack jumped up too. "Mr. Colpiller," he said and held up a hand, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to wait here. This is a very dangerous situation and I can't have you anywhere near this guy."

"But these are my daughters," Jack said in a raised his voice.

"I'm sorry, sir." Joe was walking out the door in a rush. "Please, wait here. I'll call you as soon as I know something."

Jack Colpiller was left alone in the office. "Well, I'm sure as shit not waiting here," he said out loud, and stuck his head into the hall. He looked left, then right.

"Troy?" he called.

JOE BOND'S cruiser screeched into the apartment building's parking lot, a second and third cruiser whizzing in behind him. He leapt out of his car and barked a few commands to the other officers. He sent some to the front entrance, some to the back, and still others to the street side of the building where the unit's balconies faced.

Punching a button for the elevator, he smelled the obvious odor of a skunk. *Damn things are everywhere this time of year.*

The doors slid open and he stepped in... the smell was stronger inside... almost gaggingly strong. By the time he reached the first floor, he was holding his breath. He practically jumped out of the elevator into the lobby and inhaled deeply. *Good God, it was strong. One must've got into the building.*

He jogged over to the wall holding the mailboxes for each unit. There were twenty-four of them, six units on each floor, four floors. The other uniformed officers came in from different doors, leaving one partner to cover the door while the other would search with Joe.

"Greg, you've got the first floor. Derek, you're on two. I'll take three, If we haven't got him by then," Joe directed them, "we'll hit the fourth floor together. Got it?"

They all nodded. Greg started to push the elevator door and Joe stopped him.

"I'd take the stairs if I were you," he said, "the skunk smell is strong in there."

He found the smell in the stairwell to be almost as bad.

Greg made quick work of the first floor. Everyone was home, nobody was Taz. Second floor was the same. Derek reported they were all *as old as Methuselah's balls*. Joe went door to door on the third floor, finding four units occupied by people who clearly weren't Taz, one unit empty, open, and obviously vacant. The last was locked, with its owner apparently not home—the skunk smell was stronger than ever outside the last door. *No wonder there's nobody home*, Joe thought.

He banged on the door more forcefully.

"Miami P.D.," he called loudly. "Open up!"

No answer.

From behind him he heard a voice that could only be described as a cross between the Wicked Witch of the West and Golem from Middle Earth.

"He's not home, sonny," she screeched, "so quit yer bangin'. I'm tryin' to sleep over here!"

Joe turned to see an old woman, who wasn't far off actually looking like Golem, pointing a bony E.T. finger at the door he was knocking on.

"Left a few minutes ago," she added.

"You know who lives here?" Joe asked.

“Course I do,” she said, licking her thin, wrinkly lips, “I own the building.”

“Adrian Hull?” he asked her, stepping away from the reeking door.

“Eh?” She shook her head, clearly confused. “Nah, nobody living here by that name. That’s Remington’s place.”

“Remington?”

“Yeah, Remington Reginald.”

Joe stopped short. This was an interesting development.

He opened his phone to call the station.

Walk In My Shoes

Troy Bodean sat with his court-appointed lawyer at a conference table across from the Judge, Linda *Big Boobs* Morgenstern, and her slick-back-haired attorney.

Troy was certain this wouldn't end well for him. He had tried—in vain—to get someone to get Joe Bond in there to vouch for him and explain the situation. The judge, who actually stared more at Linda's big boobs than anyone else at the table, seemed completely disinterested in the case... but wanted to extend the afternoon so that he could ogle the woman more.

"So, Mr. um" ... The judge looked down at a piece of paper in front of him.

"Bodean," Troy said.

"Yes," the judge said, and looked over his reading glasses, "Mr. Bodean. What you're telling me is that you were invited to look at Mrs. Morgenstern by a security officer at the Ritz-Carlton while she was um..." He searched the paper again. "Taking a tennis lesson?"

"Yessir," Troy said quickly. "You see, she was playing tennis and then Billy—"

"Billy?" the judge interrupted.

"The security guard at the Ritz-Carlton."

The judge made a note on his pad and then looked up at Linda and smiled.

Troy glanced over at her. She was actually wearing what looked like a tennis outfit... a tennis outfit a *stripper* might wear. Her voluminous breasts looked as if they might topple out of her top at any moment. Troy turned back to the judge. *Did he just lick his lips? Terrible time for justice not to be blind*, he thought.

"Yes," Troy continued, and the judge's eyes snapped back to him. "You see, Billy had stopped me on the way into work and said I *had* to check somethin' out. He pointed me to the hedge at the tennis courts."

"The hedge?" the judge asked.

Troy nodded.

“At the tennis courts?”

“Yup.”

He looked back at Linda. “So you were in public when the alleged peeping took place, Mrs. Morgenstern?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but her attorney touched her arm to stop her.

“The Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden provides its guests with the expectation of full privacy when they are on the grounds,” the attorney said.

Troy’s attorney said nothing. He pulled a document from his briefcase and slid it to the judge.

The judge read over it and looked over his glasses at Linda’s attorney. “The tennis facility is apparently zoned as public property,” he said, sliding the document toward Linda’s attorney.

“My client will be leaving now.” Troy’s attorney stood up and pulled Troy up by his elbow. “Good day to you, Judge.”

Troy stood, not exactly sure what was happening, but eager to get out of there.

Linda Morgenstern stuck out her bottom lip and pouted. Her attorney looked dumbstruck.

“Mr. Bodean is free to go,” the judge said.

“But, your honor,” Linda protested.

“Now, Mrs. Morgenstern,” he said, and held out a hand to touch hers, “let’s proceed to the more important matter.”

She looked confused, but also smiled a little at the judge’s touch. She batted her eyelashes quickly and leaned forward, exposing more cleavage. “What matter is that?” she asked.

“Billy,” he said.

She cocked her head sideways, like a puppy who didn’t understand what its master was saying.

“The security guard at the Ritz,” the judge said from beneath furrowed eyebrows, “he’s the one to blame here. Why, if I have anything to do with it, that young man will not only lose his job, I’ll throw the book...”

Troy didn’t hear the last of what the judge said as his attorney practically pushed him out of the conference room.

“Okay, Mr. Bodean,” —his attorney stuck out his hand— “you’re free to go.”

Troy took his hand. “Like, Gone, Baby Gone? Audi 5000 free?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, “like Escape from Alcatraz free, or Free Fallin’.”

Troy smiled broadly. “Thanks Mr. uh...”

“Steakley,” his attorney said, “John Steakley.”

“Thank you, kindly, Mr. Steakley,” Troy said, “but I just need to know one more thing.”

“Sure, Mr. Bodean,” John said and shrugged his shoulders, “what’s that?”

“You got any idea where they’re keepin’ my hat?” he asked. “I gotta get to work.”



JOE BOND WAS thunderstruck by the discovery that Taz’s cell phone was somehow at the apartment of Remington Reginald (the private investigator Jack Colpiller had hired to find his missing daughter). Whatever connection existed there, he couldn’t figure it out. But that was going to have to wait. Another development had just exploded in the case. When Joe called in to report his findings at the apartment building, Ted—a crime lab tech—had insisted that he needed to speak with the detective... he had a bombshell in the Colpiller case.

Joe took the call as his cruiser pulled out of the apartment garage. He left Derek and Greg there to wait for Remington to return.

“Go ahead, Ted,” he said to the tech.

“Okay,” said Ted, sounding out of breath, “so, you remember that we found secondary blood in the car?”

“Yes.”

“It’s definitely one of the Colpiller girls. Likely Caroline, since it’s her car.”

“Okay, go on.”

“Well, we also removed the mats and tested those. In fact, we were able to get a partial shoe print in blood from the driver’s side mat. We didn’t see it earlier because the interior was black.”

A car honked behind Joe. The light in front of him had changed, but he hadn’t noticed. He pulled out quickly. “Get to the point, Ted,” he said.

“Okay, so, we tested that blood,” Ted continued. “Same as the steering wheel. Caroline’s. And that would’ve been the end of it... except for when the shoe came in.”

“Which shoe?”

“The shoe that made the print.”

“Where did this shoe come in from?”

“A bum had it in his cart. He was causing a ruckus down by the old lighthouse, beating on the door, screaming at everybody walking by.”

“Okay, and...”

“Well, as we were checking in his possessions—all one-hundred sixty-nine of them—we noticed this single shoe. The sole was covered with blood... like, a lot of blood. Oh, and there was a lot of sand inside the shoe... maybe from being down in the water.”

Joe was having trouble connecting all the dots. “So, Ted,” he said, shrugging to no one, “what exactly have we got. I’m not following.”

“We have the shoe of Caroline’s killer.”

The pieces suddenly snapped together.

“Holy moly,” Joe said and sucked his teeth, “nice work, Ted. Email me the particulars on that shoe and the tests.”

Another call beeped in. Joe took the phone from his ear and saw it was Jack Colpiller.

“Shit,” he said, putting it back to his ear, “I gotta take this. Thanks, Ted.”

He started to click over, but then something jumped into his thoughts.

“Ted, wait,” he said quickly, “the shoe. What’s it look like?”

“Oh, well,” the tech said, “it’s a white tennis shoe. A right one.”

“Hot damn,” Joe said, clicking the phone over to talk to Jack, but he was already gone.

He flipped the switch to turn his sirens on and raced south toward Key Biscayne. He didn’t know where Taz was, but the last place he’d actually been seen was at the Tennis Garden at the Ritz. He slammed the gas pedal to the floor. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do when he got there, but it was the only place he knew to start.



TROY JUMPED off the bus at the stop nearest to the Ritz-Carlton at Key Biscayne. He’d been mildly surprised to find that Joe was gone from the police station and that Jack had gone home as well... leaving him stranded. He glanced at his phone to check the time. *Dangit*, he thought, *Don’s gonna be pissed*.

He jogged through the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton and out onto the sand. Sure enough, Don was trying desperately to service the customers waiting for their water rides, but he had absolutely no idea what he was doing. Troy ducked into the Tiki hut.

“Bout time, Tony-boy,” Don said as he slammed the cash register shut.

“It’s Troy, Don.”

“Whatever.” Don pointed out toward the sailboats. “Get your butt out there and get those boats in the water.”

Troy jerked his shoes off and tossed them into his bin. He put his shades on and trotted down the beach to where a family was waiting—not quite patiently—for their boat to be shoved out for them. The dad shot him dark glances when he noticed his wife biting her bottom lip every time she looked at Troy.

Troy worked his way through the line of waiting beachgoers until

every board, boat and jet-ski was launched. They had nothing else to rent, so it was just a waiting game until the riders' times elapsed and they came back in... or needed rescuing.

"Sorry, Don," Troy said, dripping with sweat as he walked back to the hut.

"That's it," he said, "I've had it. You're done."

"Don," Troy protested, "I'm sorry, man. I got caught up at the p..." He started to say police station, but left that hanging without handing Don any more ammunition.

"Forget it." Don was furious. His faux-Aussie accent was gone, and a little spittle was dangling from his lips as he yelled, "I want you and your crap gone, now!"

Troy opened his mouth to plead his case, but Don held up a finger.

"Nope," he said. "Get out!"

Troy took his whistle off and handed it to Don, who promptly jerked it out of his hand and threw it on the counter next to the register.

"I'm sorry, Don," he said, and shrugged his shoulders. "My bad."

Don crossed his arms and said nothing.

Troy leaned under the counter and picked up his bin of belongings. It wasn't much, but he sure as heck wasn't leaving it here. Couple of pairs of sunglasses, his shoes, a towel, some half-used tubes of zinc oxide, and an empty bottle he filled with water and reused to stay hydrated.

Troy glanced out at the ocean and saw almost all the people struggling to command their water crafts. He knew at least half of them would need a rescue and retrieval.

"Don, look," he said, "I'll be at the apartment. If you find that you need a hand, just give me a call."

"Horseshit, dude," Don spat. "You blew it. I will NEVER call you to help me. You will NEVER work here again."

"Alright, amigo," Troy said, and held up two fingers in a peace sign, "but the offer is there... if you need it."

"Out."

Troy nodded and walked out of the hut. He paused long enough to slip on his sandals; the sand was scorching hot again. He wondered how long it would be until Don called him. The guy had no experience with boats and would be lost trying to wrangle them back onto the beach. Troy figured he'd just chill out at his apartment and wait for the call.

As he walked down the access road between the Ritz-Carlton and the Grand Bay Resort, he gave a thought to calling Jack, but realized he didn't have his number. He dialed Mindy instead. It went straight to voicemail. *Dangit, Min, he thought, I hope you're okay.*

He walked past the tennis courts, scanning for any sign of Taz or Mindy, but saw only empty courts. He peeked into the glass doors of the lobby, but the only two people inside were the older lady behind the counter and the other tennis pro dude.

He wasn't sure what to do next. Chill at home? Wait by the phone? Call the police? Joe!

He opened his phone and clicked the button to dial Joe Bond. It rang once and Joe picked up.

"Joe," he said, "it's Troy. What's going on? Got anything new?"

"Troy," Joe replied, "a lot has happened. Where did you disappear to?"

Troy shook his head, recalling the peeping Tom lineup incident with Linda back at the station.

"Long story," he said. "What's going on?"

"Why don't you just get in and I'll bring you up to date?"

"Huh?" Troy asked.

"I'm pulling into the parking lot right in front of you."

Troy looked up to see the Miami P.D. cruiser crunch into the space right beside the Tennis Garden.

"That was good timing," Troy said, sliding into the passenger seat of the police car. "Why don't we just hit my place and work out the particulars."

"Good plan," Joe said. "I wasn't really sure where I was headed, but I thought I'd come back to the place where it all seems to be pointing and see if I could find out..."

Joe's voice trailed off. He looked down at the bin Troy had shoved into the floorboard as he'd gotten into the car. It was a bunch of typical beachgoing junk... except for the shoe. The one, random white tennis shoe, left foot.

"Joe?" Troy realized the detective wasn't finishing his thought. "Everything okay?"

Joe reached up and turned his radio off. "Troy?" he asked quietly.

"Where'd you get that shoe?"

Part III

The Miracle



“Out of difficulties grow miracles.”
- Jean de la Bruyere

Mama, I'm Coming Home

Brant Reginald woke to a bright, early-morning light flashing by

the windshield of Christopher Saint Juneau's old Buick LeSabre. The highway was streaming by without much to see. Long, flat and straight tree-lined stretches of road whooshed past him with the occasional farm field of cotton, or corn, or something he didn't recognize. The landscape had somehow become vaguely tropical with a random palm tree scattered along crunchy, sandy side roads.

The radio was low, but played gospel music through the static of a faraway tower. Chris was intent on the road, but his lips moved along with the lyrics to the song. Brant sat up from his sleepy slump, stretched his arms out to a cacophony of pops and cracks, and rubbed his drooping eyelids.

"Well, hello sleepy head," Chris said as he slapped Brant's shoulder. "You must've really needed the rest, my friend. You've been out for hours."

"Yeah," Brant said through a yawn, "where are we?"

He scanned the roadside for evidence of their location, but aside from the random street sign, he found no help in pinpointing their whereabouts.

"We're just a little Southeast of Bradenton, on 70," Chris said.

Brant had absolutely no idea where that was. "I have absolutely no idea where that is," he said, and smiled at Chris.

Chris laughed heartily, and said, "About an hour east of Okeechobee. We'll be there soon."

"Wow," —Brant only then realized the time jump— "how long was I out?"

"Bout seven or eight hours, I'd say."

"Holy moly." Brant looked at his phone and saw that it was indeed the next day. "I guess I was tired."

"You needed the rest, friend," Chris said and turned the radio dial to find a new station.

"Chris," Brant said and turned toward him, "I can't thank you

enough for the ride. I've been blessed by your company."

"I've been thinking about that," Chris replied. "If you'll drop me off at my buddy's house in Okeechobee, I can let you borrow my car to get you all the way to Key Biscayne. If you promise not to scratch the paint!" He let out another boisterous burst of laughter.

"Oh, Chris, I couldn't..."

"Sure, ya can," he said, "I won't need it for another week, what with the revival goin' on and all."

"But I..." Brant felt his throat tighten up.

This man, who barely knew him, was basically giving him everything he had... everything. He couldn't help but make the symbolic connection with one of his favorite passages from the Bible. This man was giving all he had to the poor and following Jesus to the revival. Brant wondered if he should stay in town and check it out.

"Chris," he asked, "when is the first service?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he said, smiling broadly. "Tonight. Five o'clock meet 'n greet. Six o'clock meeting."

"You know," Brant said, feigning a big yawn, "I'm still feeling a bit groggy... probably shouldn't drive the rest of the way today."

Chris nodded expectantly.

"What if I just crashed out this afternoon and came to the revival with you this evening?" Brant asked.

"Pastor," Chris blinked as his eyes became moist, "it would be an honor if you'd join me. Of course it's alright!"

"Good." Brant felt a tugging on his heart.

He was sure this was God moving him again. He didn't know what he would find at the revival, but for the Holy Spirit to so obviously place it in his path... it had to be divine.

"So, what now?" Brant asked. "Where can we get a bite and stay before the service?"

"My mother's house," Chris said matter-of-factly.

"Your mother?"

"Well, sure," Chris shrugged, "that okay with you, brother?"

"Oh, yes." Brant fought the urge to look surprised. "I just hadn't thought about... I mean, I just didn't know you had a..."

"A mother?" Chris threw his head back and laughed yet again. "Oh, I've got one alright, friend. Who do you think told me about the revival?"

"Right," Brant said, laughing, "I don't know why I didn't see that coming."

"The good news is," Chris said as he rubbed his belly, "she's a wonderful cook. I'll bet she'll have a fine lunch laid out and ready for us when we get there."

"Chris," Brant said, "I'm really happy we met. I think this is going

to be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

Chris’s fingers finally found a clear gospel station and he began to boom out the words to *My Jesus*... Brant joined in.



MRS. ANASTASIA SAINT JUNEAU was the picture of grandmotherly love. A red checkered apron covered a blue dress with patchwork pockets. Her hair was white and fluffy—fresh from the beauty parlor. She wore house slippers with little flowers embroidered on the top, and padded around the kitchen slow and soft.

“Well, I shore am happy to meet a good friend of Chris’s,” she said as she slid a plate in front of Brant.

It had scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, a piece of heavily buttered toast, a small dollop of grits, and a slide of honeydew melon. Brant hadn’t realized how hungry he was until then, and grabbed his fork to begin shoveling the wonderful smelling food into his mouth.

“Son,” she said, and laid a soft hand on his arm.

Chris steepled his hands and whispered, “Grace.”

Brant laid his fork down and clasped his hands together.

“Do you mind offering up our blessing, Brant?” Mrs. Saint Juneau asked him.

“Oh, gosh, Mrs. Saint Juneau—” He started to make an excuse.

“Just call me Mama,” she said, her eyes smiling at him. “Everyone does.”

Brant almost raised his protest again, but then thought better of it.

“Of course, Mama,” he said.

He bowed his head and was immediately aware of the presence of God. His heart was warm and full, and he felt tears forming in his eyes. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d prayed in earnest... at least without a television camera present.

“Father,” he started, “thank you for this journey. Thank you for these friends. Thank you for this meal. May all three nourish our bodies and our spirits with your healing power. Amen.”

“Amen,” Chris and Mama chimed in together.

They all began to eat and it was quiet for a moment except for the occasional clink of a utensil on china. Chris was the first one to empty his plate, but he went back for seconds. Brant finished his, but declined to eat anymore.

“I would,” he said leaning back in his chair, “but I’m as full as a tick.”

Mrs. Saint Juneau—Mama—began shuffling back and forth to the kitchen to clear the table, and Brant jumped up.

“Please let me help you, Mama,” he said, grabbing a plate and a

glass.

"No, no," she said, taking them from him, "you boys just go into the den and watch a little TV. After a while, we'll head up to Raulerson." She patted him on the arm.

He had absolutely no idea what Raulerson was, and just smiled and nodded.

When Chris had finished his second plate, he invited Brant to join him in the next room. The den was straight out of the seventies, with a dark gold shag carpet, two recliners sporting a brash floral pattern, a TV tray between them holding a Bible and a wireless telephone receiver. The television was an old thirteen-inch RCA model—Brant wondered if it would be in color or black and white—with a pair of rabbit ears on top wrapped in aluminum foil. Sheer panels on the windows allowed a soft glow to fill the room.

"She only gets one channel," Brant said, "so, we'll see what we can get."

Not surprisingly, it was a church channel showing old televangelical programming from, you guessed it, the seventies. Big hair, big teeth, big money.

"I love watchin' these old things," Chris said and laughed, "they used to really love the Lord back then."

"And the Lord's money," Brant added.

Chris laughed and rocked back in one of the recliners. Brant watched through half-closed eyelids and was quickly asleep. He woke to a gentle touch on his arm. It was Mama. She was still in her blue dress, minus the apron, with a cotton shawl over her shoulders.

"Hun, Chris and I are headed up to Raulerson," she said softly. "You can stay here and get some shut eye before the meeting if you like."

"What's Raulerson, ma'am?"

"It's the hospital," she said, smiling. "I like to do some visitation there. Some folks ain't got nobody to come visit 'em, so I like to go up and say hello."

She patted a Tupperware she was holding in her other hand. "Take 'em some cookies, you know?"

Chris was looking over her shoulder expectantly.

"That sounds nice, Mama," Brant said as he raised himself up out of the recliner, "I would love to go."

Chris smiled broadly. They all piled into the old Buick, and Brant sat quietly, tracing the gold inlaid letters on the cover of his Bible.

God was truly on the move.

An Incident

Gil Dickerson won the Florida gubernatorial election in a landslide bigger than any previous Democratic candidate... ever. Every newspaper in the region—and even some of those several states beyond the region—announced the result with all the pomp and feeling of a coronation. There were countless editorial pieces on the coming of the savior of the state of Florida, and most of those pined for the day that Governor Dickerson could throw his hat into the presidential ring.

The Gallup poll for the upcoming presidential race, barely more than three years away, had him winning against every other candidate they could think of... including past presidents with high popularity ratings. He was being crowned not only as the Governor of Florida, but also as the future President of the United States.

His wife, Sandy, did not find it surprising that Gil Dickerson couldn't sleep, but she couldn't have been more surprised over the real reason why he tossed and turned.

"You have to sleep, hun," she would say, and hand him a prescribed sleeping pill.

He took them from her, but would flush them down the toilet every time. He didn't want the meds to dull his thinking, especially under the circumstances. The first indication that something was wrong came at the press conference, where he intended to release the names of his appointees to his cabinet.

He'd been reading the names, when a man stood up in the back of the press room and started shouting.

"You jackass!" the man screamed, and ran toward the podium. "You took my Jackie away from me!"

His security detail pounced on the man before he could get within ten feet of Gil, but it had been enough. The chest pain in his chest knocked Gil to the ground. At first, he was sure he'd been shot, but as he fell to his knees he realized he wasn't bleeding. He tried to clutch his chest with his left hand, but it wasn't responding. *Oh, God*, he

thought, *I'm having a heart attack.*

The doctors, under incredible pressure from clandestine persons to do so, would call it an *incident*—not an actual heart attack—but it had been a heart attack just the same. Gil had been checked by the doctors and they had found two arteries one-hundred percent blocked. Two stents later, he was pronounced in perfect health with very little chance of a recurring incident. The press herded doctor after doctor across their stages, all of whom were quick to pronounce that this sort of thing happened all the time—especially to political figures.

Gil woke up in a hospital bed after being whisked away to the heliport at Raulerson Hospital. He was admitted under a false name and his whereabouts were kept under the strictest confidentiality. In fact, nobody knew where he was except for Sandy and James Hardy. Sandy had been by his side for over thirty-six hours, and he sent her home as soon as the doctors assured her that he was back to one-hundred percent health and that he was only staying in the hospital so they could complete all the tests.

James Hardy came in only after she'd been ushered out to a private helicopter to take her home.

"How ya feelin' there, buddy?" asked the senator from Vermont, who came in all smiles and squeezed Gil's upper arm. "Ya gave us quite the scare there."

"You heard him, James," —Gil didn't bother to fake being jovial—"It went out all over the nation. It was live for Christ's sake. It won't be long now until someone makes the connection."

Hardy's demeanor instantly went dark. "Now, you listen here, *Governor* Dickerson," he said, squeezing Gil's arm harder. "We have worked very hard to get you to this point. Do you really think we haven't taken care of this?"

"How could you—"

"That man is in custody right now," James interrupted, "being questioned from six ways to Sunday and in grave danger of being charged for attempted assassination."

Gil felt his mouth drop open. "He had a gun?"

"If I need him to have had a gun," James said, easing the pressure on Gil's arm, "he will have had a gun."

Gil studied the man's eyes. He was becoming increasingly worried about what James Hardy was seemingly prepared to do to make sure nothing stood in his way. Gil wondered when he would become *the something* in his way.

"What do they have so far?" Gil asked.

"They know that this man's wife, Jackie Ranchero-Doral, was an intern in your office," he said, "and that she is currently missing."

"Shit," Gil said, whistling through his teeth.

James held up a hand. "It's okay. We have retroactively recorded a few memos from your office detailing her less-than-stellar punctuality, and thrown in a couple of write-ups for no-shows as well."

Gil felt his heart rate speed up and the monitor next to him beeped.

"Easy buddy," James said. "Get that under control."

Gil took a few deep breaths, and his heart rate slowed just as the nurse entered his room.

"Are you doing alright, Mr. Diavia?" she asked him.

"Oh, gosh, yes," Gil said, and smiled and made a show of adjusting his position in bed. "Sorry, I was just getting comfortable and you know how that makes the heart rate jump."

"No worries," she said, with a trace of annoyance in her voice.

James looked at Gil. "Mr. Diavia?"

"My wife's horse's name," he said and shrugged.

"And the nurse has no idea who you are?"

"Doesn't seem to."

"Well, don't get used to that, Mr. Governor," James said, then winked at him.

Gil said nothing. He clicked on the television to find a local story about Mr. Doral. They were detailing two separate incidents of domestic violence against his current wife, Jackie, and also against an ex-girlfriend. Neither had ended in prosecution, but they had two different mugshots of Mr. Doral looking decidedly evil. Gil looked over at James.

"We didn't do that," he said, shrugging, "Mr. Doral did all of that to himself."

The news story continued and showed a reporter detailing the multitude of guns and rifles that Mr. Doral owned and used on a regular basis, one of which was discovered to be illegally purchased.

James Hardy pulled out his cell phone, tapped a number, and said, "Get me that gun."

He hung up, took the remote control from Gil, and turned the television off.

"I've got to tell Sandy," Gil said. "I owe her at least an explanation of what was going on with Jackie and I."

James Hardy's face darkened. He pursed his lips and inhaled deeply. "Now, you just hold that thought for a second," he said, and walked toward the monitor. As he traced his finger down a bag of saline solution that was dripping into a wire running into Gil's arm, he said, "I'm not so sure the timing is right for such a thing."

Gil felt a chill run up his spine. "James," he whispered, "I can't lie to my wife. She deserves better than this."

Hardy's face softened a bit. "Look, Gil," he said, "this is all my

fault really. I'm the one who set you up with Jackie. Hell, you can blame it on me when you decide to talk to Sandy about it. In fact, I insist that you throw me under the bus when it comes to your adultery. I will be more than happy to beg forgiveness from her."

His phone pinged. Pulling it from his pocket, he stole a quick glance at the screen and then tucked it back into his suit. "But let's hold off on this revelation," he said quietly and glanced back at the door, "at least until we've taken the White House."

"Aw, hell, James," Gil said, raising his arms, "I've just barely won the governorship and with this damn heart attack—"

"Incident," James corrected him.

"Okay, whatever," Gil continued. "There's no guarantee of anything at this point."

"That, my friend," James said and poked a finger at Gil's chest, "is where you are wrong. There are a lot of people invested in you, a lot of very powerful people."

"James, you're hurting me." Gil grabbed James's hand, but he wasn't strong enough to remove it from his chest.

"And these people," James continued without releasing the pressure, "have assured me that you *will* be the next President of the United States of America. And you and I both know that I will be the Vice President."

He pulled his hand away and Gil grabbed his chest.

"Are we clear?" James Hardy asked dryly.

"Crystal clear."

"Well, hello there, Mr. Diavia," a kindly voice chattered from the doorway.

They both looked to see an elderly lady standing in the door holding a tray of Jello cups.

She seemed to notice Gil wasn't alone. "Oh, no," she said, frowning, "I'm so sorry, I didn't realize you had company. I will come back later."

"It's okay, Mrs. Saint Juneau," Gil said pointedly, "he was just leaving."

In a flash, James Hardy became the smiling, baby-kissing, hand shaking politician he always was in public.

"Not before I steal some of that homemade Jello," he said, beaming.

The elderly lady smiled back and tittered. He grabbed a cup and pecked her on the cheek as he walked out the door.

"Get well soon, Mr. Diavia," James's voice echoed down the hall.

"Well, he sure is a nice man," Mrs. Saint Juneau said as she walked into the room and laid a Jello cup on Gil's table.

"Mhmm," Gil said and nodded absentmindedly.

“How are you feeling today, Governor?” she asked him.

Gil was shocked for a second and his face must’ve shown it.

“Oh, come now,” she patted his hand, “don’t you think I would recognize the man I voted for in the election?”

Gil smiled and took a bite of Jello. “Thank you, Mrs. Saint Juneau.”

“I could just tell by looking into your eyes what a fine, honest, upstanding young man you were,” she said as she picked up her tray.

Gil inhaled deeply. He decided in that moment that he would tell Sandy. She deserved the fine, honest, upstanding young man that she had married, and telling her what had happened was the only way he would feel worthy of her trust and love.

“Can I ask you a favor?” the elderly woman asked as she reached his door and turned.

“Of course,” he answered, and joked, “as long as it doesn’t have anything to do with voting for a bill you sponsor.”

She chuckled. “Oh no, no, nothing like that. I’d just like to have my son drop in and meet you... if that’s alright.”

“Can he keep our little secret?”

“Of course, he can.”

“Then that would be just fine with me.”

“Wonderful,” she said, “I’ll bring him by when I finish my rounds.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Saint Juneau,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. *Diavia*,” she said, and winked.

Gil Dickerson sighed and took his last bite of Jello.

If The Shoe Fits...

Troy Bodean again sat in the jail cell that he'd been in just a day before. Joe Bond had acted very strange upon seeing the discarded white shoe in his belongings bin that he'd had with him when he left work—ostensibly for the last time. Now he was waiting... not exactly arrested... just being held.

He lie on his back staring at the ceiling and wondered if it was just his lot in life to be locked up. He also wondered what in the heck he was being locked up for this time. At least this time, he wasn't locked up with a bunch of Troy clones for being a Peeping Tom. But then again, he worried that this time he'd been locked up for something much worse.

As he stared at the concrete ceiling, he began to think about Mindy. He hoped to God she was okay, but the longer this situation went on, he worried that she really was in grave danger... if Taz hadn't already done something awful to her. Taz was really the key here. Troy sensed he was the bad guy in all of this, he just had a hunch that the guy was becoming more and more unhinged, and offing the two girls was easily something he was capable of... and now he was missing too.

Troy ran over the details in his mind, trying desperately to figure out where the allegedly murderous tennis pro could be, but nothing seemed to click. He ran down the list in his head.

Taz comes to America to teach tennis.

Taz teaches rich, pretty girl—Caroline.

Caroline... angers/dumps/ridicules Taz?

Taz murders Caroline.

Troy shook his head against the stainless-steel bench he was laying on. That hurdle seemed a bit too high. Would Taz murder Caroline over something simple like that? According to Mindy, she'd been taking lessons from him for years. Maybe it was a caste thing—Taz was a servant while Caroline was royalty. Something about that seemed more plausible, but still a stretch. Troy continued his list.

Taz moves on with Mindy as a new obsession.

Mindy rebuffs him.

Mindy's dad has P.I. look into Taz.

Troy sat up. Maybe the investigator had found Taz out and Taz got spooked and went into hiding. But why harm Mindy? Mindy had been suspicious of Taz all along... maybe she'd confronted him. Where the hell was he keeping her? If she was even alive. Troy shuddered at the thought. She was definitely still alive, he had to keep believing that. A dark thought entered his mind. *If you've hurt her, Taz...* He shook it away.

Maybe the two girls were just locked up in a basement dungeon somewhere, like that crazy dude had in Silence of the Lambs. Troy thought that sounded about right. He wasn't sure about Caroline, but he was pretty sure Taz wanted to keep at least one of the girls alive... to play with. Ugh, Troy shuddered again.

He went to the door and pounded on the wire-lined glass.

"Hey!" he shouted, "what's taking so long? Where's Joe?"

"Dang, man!" a voice murmured from the other side of the room. "Keep it down, bro."

Troy turned to see a bum lying in the corner of the room, curled up in a fetal position.

"Cantcha see I'm tryin' a get some sleep?"

"Sorry." Troy turned back to the door.

He could only see a few feet down the hall before it turned a corner. No one was coming.

"Dangit," he said and slumped back down on the bench.

The bum uncurled himself and stretched. He yawned and smacked his lips loudly.

"You got anything to drink?" he asked Troy as he slowly stood up.

He was dressed in dirty, ragged, mismatched clothes that all appeared to have come from various dumpsters and such. His beard was long and brown, uncut and untrimmed. He wore a bandana on top of his head and had three more tied to his belt loop dangling down his leg. Spares, Troy guessed.

"Sorry, dude," Troy said and held up his hands, palms up, "I got nothin'"

The man cackled out a raspy laugh, revealing he had fewer teeth than holes in his gums.

"Yeah, I guess not," he said through a hacked cough, then shot a suspicious glance at the door. "Ya got any Molly?" he asked Troy.

"Molly?"

"Yeah, man. Molly."

"Well," Troy shrugged, "I don't know what Molly is, so no, I don't suppose I have any of that either."

“Shit, man,” the bum said, now scratching his arms in the crook of his elbow, “that’s too bad. I’m comin’ down somethin’ fierce.”

“Sorry, dude.”

“You’re alright, man,” the bum said, then plopped down on the bench beside Troy.

He smelled awful. Like he’d rubbed a rotten banana all over his body, and then to be sure of a bad smell, had eaten a few rotten eggs.

Troy gulped and tried not to breathe through his nose. The man suddenly wrapped his arm around Troy.

“Whatchu in here for, Jabroni?” the bum asked with his mouth a little too close to Troy’s ear.

“Ummm...” Troy’s mind raced, “littering.”

The bum squinted at him.

“And umm... causin’ a disturbance,” Troy lied.

The bum seemed to like this better. “Me too, brother. Me too.” He nodded his head enthusiastically. “They locked up ma’ place down at the lighthouse. I wasn’t botherin’ nobody... just crashin’ there whenever it was cold or rainin’.”

“That sucks,” Troy said, with no idea what the man was talking about, but he agreed anyway.

“You’re alright, Jabroni,” he said with a grin.

“Thanks.”

“Yup,” the bum said and closed his eyes. He was fast asleep within seconds.

Troy eased out from under his arm and gently laid the man down on the bench.

The door to the cell jerked open and Joe Bond stuck his head in. “Troy, come with me.”

“Thank the Lord.” Troy felt the bum’s smell following him as he walked out. Joe clipped down the hall at nearly a jog and Troy skipped along in an effort to keep up.

“Hey, Joe,” he called to the detective, “I don’t know what’s up with that shoe, but it ain’t mine. Heck, I don’t wear shoes unless I have to, and I wouldn’t wear ones like that anyway.”

“We know,” Joe said as he turned into his office and pulled Troy in. “It’s a size nine and you’re a size eleven. But we have the matching shoe and they appear to be the shoes that made bloody prints in Caroline’s car. It’s not much blood, but it’s hers. And we found it along with traces of Taz’s blood on the steering wheel.”

“Dangit,” Troy said, “I knew somethin’ was up with him.”

“We’re sure he had them on when he...” Joe considered his words, “when he kidnapped her. The question is, what did he do with her?”

Troy shrugged. “Been racking my brain with that all night. I have no idea.”

“And there’s something else,” said a voice from a chair behind the door of Joe’s office.

Troy turned to see Jack Colpiller sitting there.

“It appears that he might be working with the private investigator I hired,” Jack said, standing.

Troy furrowed his brow. “Taz? Working with the P.I. dude?”

Joe broke in, “We traced his cell phone location to an apartment in Liberty Heights. The apartment was rented in the name of Remington Hoyt Reginald—the man Jack hired to find Caroline.”

“Why in the heck would the P.I. be workin’ with Taz?”

Joe shrugged his shoulders. “No clue. Neither of them were at the apartment.”

“And it’s not like he wasn’t going to get paid handsomely for his efforts,” Jack said. “I spared no expense.”

An image of dinosaurs running through an empty building trying to eat people flashed into Troy’s mind.

“Well, hell, let’s get out to that apartment,” Troy said and turned toward the door.

“Troy, there are four units watching the building,” Joe said quickly, “so if anyone shows up there, we’ll know about it.”

Troy felt the helplessness coming back. “Dang,” he said and slumped into a chair beside Jack. “What now?”

“We wait,” Joe said quietly.

“And pray for a miracle,” Jack added.

A Mission From God

Brant Reginald had lost his two companions, Christopher and

Anastasia Saint Juneau, wandering around the halls of Raulerson hospital. Nurses and doctors rushed to and fro without much of a glance in his direction. He nodded and smiled to patients wearing paper nightgowns, and their visitors wearing two-day-old clothes. He dropped a couple of quarters in the vending machine and sipped a cup of burnt black coffee.

His mind retraced the tumultuous events of the past few days. He'd gone from heavenly host to fallen angel in no time flat. From television star being beamed across the country saving the souls of the million-plus masses of viewers, to barely speaking to the lost souls buried down in the middle of Florida at the Raulerson Hospital. He was a long way from Fairhope, and felt like he was even farther from God.

But then again, he was sure God had brought him here. The events were too coincidental, and the hand of the Holy Spirit could be seen in every turn he took. He stopped in the middle of the hallway and looked up.

"Father," he said, praying to the fluorescent lights in the ceiling, "send me where you will. I'm here because of you, now show me what you would have me do."

A nurse jogged down the hall from behind him, clipping his elbow and throwing his coffee in a dirty brown rain all over his shirt.

The nurse turned her head back toward him as she ran. "I'm so sorry," she called, but she didn't slow down. She turned a corner and disappeared.

Brant felt something. An invisible force, grabbing him and tugging him in her direction. He dropped the empty cup and started after her. Then he trotted, and finally, he ran. He turned the corner after the nurse and slammed through the stainless double doors at the end of the hall. He never noticed the sign above them that said, No Admittance—I.C.U.

"Hey!" a man in blue scrubs shouted after him as he passed.

"It's okay," he shouted back, "I'm on a mission from God."

He smiled at the reference as he ran on. The nurse rounded another corner and he followed. She ducked into a room with a label beside the door, that said, Jane Doe. He swallowed, inhaled deeply, and pushed open the heavy glass door.

Inside, the nurse was checking the patient's heart with a stethoscope. Then she wrapped a sleeve around the patient's arm. She pumped it a few times, taking the patient's blood pressure. When she was satisfied, she shook her head. "Gave me quite a scare there, Jane," she said to the patient.

The person lying in the bed had bandages covering almost her entire head. At least, Brant thought it was a girl. With so much of her face covered, his only clue was her long curly hair.

"What happened to her?" he asked.

The nurse jumped and he realized she hadn't known he was in the room. "Who the hell are you?" she demanded.

"My name is Brant Reginald," he explained. "I'm just here with some friends doing visi—"

"Oh, my God!" the nurse said, "Pastor Reginald! I watch you on TV every week." She ran up to him and wrapped her arms around him. "You have blessed me in so many ways. I can't thank you enough," she said into his shoulder.

She released her hug, but held tight to his arms. She was smiling through tear-filled eyes. He felt a surge of pain slice into his heart. He felt like a charlatan.

"I don't do that anymore," he said.

She looked puzzled and slightly distraught.

"The TV thing," he said quickly.

"Ohhhh." It appeared as though something occurred to her. "You do house calls now, eh?"

"I beg your pardon?" he asked.

"Visitations," she said, "you do healing visitations now. Right?"

"Oh," Brant stammered, "oh, no. Well, I mean... I am doing a visitation. But the healing happens... um, well, it's God's decision whom to heal and so forth."

"I understand completely," she said, nodding. "I always knew those people on TV were expectin' too much. I mean, if it's God's will for you to be sick, you're gonna be sick. And if it's God's will for you to be healed, then you're gonna be healed. Am I right?"

Brant blinked at the woman. Well, that was true... wasn't it? He wondered why he hadn't seen it this way before... and instead let God decide who would be healed and who wouldn't. But it wouldn't play well on TV to have God turn someone down... would it?

"You are right," he said.

The nurse squeezed his arm. "You're a good man, Mr. Reginald."

Brant started to protest the label, but then the nurse's phone chirped. She looked at the message.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, "I've got another call."

"It's okay," he said, smiling.

"Will you sit with her?" she asked, and pointed toward the girl in the bed.

"Oh... um, sure," Brant said. "What's her story?"

The nurse shook her head as she opened the door to go. "We don't really know. Came in with a bunch of fractures and water in her lungs. She's been in a coma ever since, and we haven't been able to find out yet who she is. No one's claimed her and her D.N.A. and dental workup hasn't returned any matches. She's a true Jane Doe."

Brant looked at the woman in the bandages. "I'll sit with her awhile."

"Bless you, Mr. Reginald," the nurse said as the door closed behind her.

BRANT WOKE to find that he'd slipped into sleep in a chair beside Jane Doe's bed. The sun was streaming between the blinds, telling him that it was late afternoon and headed toward evening. He glanced at the clock on the wall and decided he'd better get going if he was going to make the revival tonight. He stood up and stretched, joints crackling and popping as he did.

"God, I'm getting' old," he said to no one.

He brushed a strand of Jane Doe's hair off her forehead. She had young looking skin, what little of it he could see, and though her eyes were closed and he couldn't see any of the lower half of her face... she looked very pretty.

Words forced themselves into his mind and he almost rebelled against them. It was his carefully crafted, meticulously worded, brilliantly constructed prayer... of healing. The fakery he'd used on television to heal the steady stream of sick, dying, and broken—or at least those actors who played the sick, dying, and broken—was coming back to him. He felt a tingling in his fingertips and rubbed his hands together to make it stop—it didn't.

Time in the room seemed to stop. The clicking, whirring and whooshing sounds of all the machinery keeping Jane Doe alive seemed to fade away. The rattling, clanking, and buzzing of hospital business outside the door turned down to zero. The silence was deafening. His hands shook as he reached out and let them hover over Jane Doe's body. Tears poured from his eyes as he suddenly became terrified that God would not choose to heal her. Or maybe it was the

fear that God did not want to use him as his instrument anymore.

As if to erase this from his mind, the sunlight outside hit the horizon and bright orange and yellow light blazed across the room and drew lines across Jane Doe. His hands were on fire now.

Brant Reginald laid his right hand on her forehead and took her left hand in his. He spoke quietly, but as he felt the power flow through him, he grew louder and louder.

The sun went down and the room fell into a haze of twilight. He slumped down into the chair beside her and waited. Nothing happened. He tried to stand to leave, but he was too tired. His legs were completely drained of their strength and he felt glued to the chair. So, he sat, and he prayed.

Darkness fell across the room and he slipped off to sleep.

HE WOKE to the sound of a helicopter thumping away from the building. He wondered if it was a chopper airlifting someone badly injured back to the hospital. He pulled a blind down and to his surprise, saw a black helicopter with some sort of government seal disappearing into the distance.

“Good morning,” a voice said from behind him.

It was a soft voice, muffled behind a few bandages, but he knew instantly that it was Jane Doe. He whirled around to see her staring at him.

Tears once again streamed down his face and he fell to his knees. Looking up at the ceiling, he thanked God for the miracle that had happened overnight. His heart pounded in his chest.

“Who are you?” Jane Doe asked.

Brant looked up at her through wet eyes. “My name is Brant Reginald. And who are you, my dear?”

She thought about it for a second and something seemed to suddenly occur to her. “I’m Jackie,” she said, “at least, I think that’s my name.”

Brant stood and took her hand in his. “I am very pleased to meet you, Jackie.”

The door to her room flew open. Doctors and nurses and a whole bunch of people in scrubs swarmed in and surrounded her, shoving Brant away from her bed.

He was escorted to the waiting room by the nurse he’d met yesterday. Her eyes were wide and she seemed completely awestruck.

“I just can’t believe it,” she said as she directed him to the lobby, “I mean, if you’ll just wait here for a few minutes. I just can’t...”

She never finished her thought before scurrying away. It was nearly an hour later that she came back and the gaggle of medical professionals that followed her all had smiles on their faces and were

high-fiving and congratulating each other.

The nurse stood in front of Brant. She had her hands on her hips, but she was smiling broadly.

“So,” he asked, standing, “how is she?”

“She’s awake,” the nurse said, “and everything is perfect. Heart, lungs, eyes, mouth... everything.”

Brant put his hands together. “That’s great news!”

“Mr. Reginald,” —the nurse took his arm and led him down the hall toward Jackie’s room— “This girl has been in a coma for over a week, with no response whatsoever. I mean, what happened in there last night?”

“A miracle,” he said, and smiled.

“Well, there you are!” called a familiar voice from behind him. “Mama and I were so worried about you last night!”

Brant turned to see Chris standing in the hall. He was beaming and smiling, with his hands outstretched as if to hug Brant.

Brant laughed and wrapped his arms around the man.

“We looked everywhere for you,” Chris said, shrugging his shoulders. “Heck, I thought you must’ve bugged out on us and took off for Key Biscayne.”

Thoughts of Key Biscayne and his son drifted into his mind and he knew he needed to get on with his journey soon.

Chris continued. “We saved so many last night, Brant. I wish you could’ve seen it. I was so worried about you. I thought you were lost.”

Brant put his hand on the man’s shoulder. “I was lost,” he said quietly, “but thanks to you and Mama... and a... well... a miracle that happened last night... I am found.”

“Praise Jesus,” Chris said, “I’m so happy for you, brother. Join us for the revival tonight?”

Brant shook his head. “I’m gonna check in on Jackie. And then I’m heading on down the road.”

“Travelin’ on down the road, eh?” Chris said and winked.

“That I am,” Brant said, and stuck out his hand.

Chris ignored it and wrapped him in a big bear hug again.

“I can’t thank you enough for the ride,” Brant said, “and everything else. I... I’m not sure I would’ve made it without you.”

“Heck,” Chris said, chuckling, “Greyhound would’ve gotten you here and probably a little cooler than I did to boot.”

Brant shook his head. “I’ll never forget my journey with Christopher Saint Juneau, that’s for sure. A memory I will treasure forever.”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Chris said, and smiled as he pulled a small box out of his pocket and handed it to Brant.

“What’s this?”

“A little somethin’ I got for you to take with you, wherever you go,” Chris said.

“Thanks, Chris,” Brant said, and turned to go.

“Safe travels,” Chris called from behind him. “Go with God.”

Brant opened the box as he walked toward Jackie’s room. It was a small sterling silver chain with an oval shaped pendant dangling from it. He flipped it over to see the inscription.

It was a simple carving of a man with the name *St. Christopher* written on the outside edge.

The patron saint of travelers, Brant thought.

He turned around, but Chris was gone.

Sister Save Me

Mindy Colpiller felt her bottom lip cracking as she sat in the

steaming hot room at the top of the Cape Florida Lighthouse. The tears had long since stopped flowing, but she still felt as though she was crying. Dehydration had robbed her of that.

The chest labeled OIL laid open, its lid removed and flung across the room. Mindy had broken it free by unscrewing the hinges and then jerking it off the front—with the padlock still attached.

Inside the box, she had discovered the gruesome and heartbreaking remains of her twin sister, Caroline. Taz had not only beaten her to death, but had also broken her legs—and maybe her arms—to make her body compact enough to be shoved into the small chest. After seeing the disgusting remains, she'd screamed until her voice was hoarse and had broken into sobs that jerked her chest up and down.

And then she had screamed some more, upon realizing she was likely to suffer a similar fate... if she survived the heat long enough for Taz to return... if he returned at all.

She had exhausted herself beating on the trapdoor style hatch that led out of the top of the lighthouse. She'd tried slamming the broken lid of the box onto it over and over again, but had only succeeded in scratching the door and cutting her hands in several places. It was hopeless. The door was apparently built to withstand strong storms.

As she sat with her back against the rounded wall, looking up at the wide windows above her, it struck her as ironic that she was trapped in a building made to send a beacon out for miles and miles around, but she couldn't get it to make a peep. She breathed as deeply as she could; she had long since become desensitized to the stench odor of her sister's rotting body.

She ran through all the memories of Caroline she could, hoping to sear them into her mind for all time. Playing dolls together, insisting that their dolls be dressed alike. Riding bikes together that matched, exactly down to the last streamer flowing from the handlebars. Dating the same guy in high school... that hadn't worked out so well, but he

turned out to be a jerk, so they had both dumped him. Asking for the same car on their sixteenth birthday... Daddy had agreed, of course... and then getting the same vanity plate with a slight variation. COLPI1 and COLPI2.

It had been Caroline who had talked Mindy into smoking pot in college, and had gotten them both into the biggest trouble with their Dad they had ever been in. Mindy had immediately quit, but Caroline had kept smoking; she the free spirit, Mindy the straight arrow. Caroline had been the one to travel far and wide on road trip after road trip, following festivals and party bands all over the country. She was the one who'd had the pregnancy scare with some stoner out of Colorado. Dramatically, that had ended when the next month came around. Mindy had held her sister in her arms as she cried... not sure whether to be sad or relieved she wasn't going to have a baby. The recovery from that event had pushed Caroline into another kind of trip with some pretty heavy drugs and a guy who'd promised to stay with her forever... Naturally, he didn't, but the addictions Caroline had formed to the substances he brought her did. Mindy had dropped everything and stayed at the clinic with her sister while she got clean and well.

Lately, though, with college done for Mindy, and Caroline romping around South Beach and trading the hippy life for the Miami party, they had grown apart.

Caroline was rarely at home for more than three days in a row, and when she was there, she spent her time down at the tennis courts, off to Brickell for shopping, or on South Beach meeting her newest Latin lover. Mindy was left to sit on the couch and listen to her dad complain about how neither of them was doing anything productive with their lives, and that he'd be damned if he was going to leave them anything in his will.

Mindy knew this was a lie, but she also knew that their father, the great Jack Colpiller, was a picture of good health. He wasn't likely to be kicking the bucket anytime soon. So, Mindy had started to make plans. With her father's approval, she had signed up for classes at SCAD—the Savannah College of Art and Design. She had convinced Caroline to drive up with her last summer and check the school out. Caroline partied it up while they were there, and even said she'd consider going to school with Mindy... but, unfortunately, her artistic talent was limited to deciding the proper shade of eye-shadow to apply for maximum effect under the black lights of Club Opium on South Beach.

The rift between the sisters had opened up after that trip. It got wider when Caroline convinced her dad to buy her the Porsche. It was only fair, she argued, since he was footing the outlandish tuition SCAD

was going to charge him for Mindy's schooling. He relented after Caroline claimed she would run away from home and travel the country with... whatever that guy's name was from Colorado.

Mindy had resented the car, and more than once had threatened to scratch the crap out of the hood... but she never did. They were twin sisters, after all.

And now, Caroline was dead, brutally murdered and dismembered by that asshole, Taz. It felt like the left side of her body had been torn away. Where she had once felt the bond that only siblings—only twins—could feel, she now felt nothing.

She screamed into the empty space and it echoed dully. She wondered if it could be heard at all outside, but she was pretty sure she was over ninety feet off the ground and just a few feet from the churning surf. No one would hear anything.

She sat in silence, trying desperately to figure out how to get out... it was like an old riddle she remembered her sister telling her. You're in a room with no doors and no windows. All you have is a pencil. How do you escape? She hated Caroline for torturing her with that one back in the sixth grade. She'd googled it and asked everyone she knew, but the answer was nowhere to be found. Eventually, Caroline had agreed to tell her, if she gave her the weekly allowance their dad paid them. Fifty bucks. It wasn't much, and at first Mindy had been against it.

"Yeah, right," Mindy remembered saying, "that's never gonna happen."

But every time Caroline got the chance, she would say Mindy was stupid for not knowing and finally, it was too much. Mindy forked over the fifty bucks.

"Okay, tell me," she demanded.

"It's simple," Caroline said, and smirked. "Break the pencil in half."

"What?!" Mindy was furious. "How does that get you out?"

"Well, now the pencil is broken into two halves," —Caroline had tucked the money into her purse, bill by bill... taunting Mindy— "and what do two halves make?"

"A whole?"

"Exactly," Caroline jeered. "You just climb out the hole."

To say that Mindy had been angry did not come close to the reality of that little game. She had ignored Caroline for two months without so much as speaking a single word to her. But like all arguments between them, it faded in time. She wished Caroline was alive to help her get out of this room now.

She glanced at the box that held Caroline's brutalized body, then jumped up and ran to over it. She tipped it up, and part of her sister's arm tumbled out. She almost vomited, but she regained her

composure quickly.

"Sorry, sis," she said as she began to empty the box of gruesome body parts.

Her sister was wearing a white Nike tank top with matching white Nike shorts. She reached into the box and tucked her hands inside Caroline's pockets, hoping she had something—anything—that could help her escape. Her fingers closed on a small tubular object. Elated that Taz hadn't thought to empty Caroline's pockets, she dug through them all and came up with a small pile of her sister's things; her driver's license, a tube of lipstick, a disposable lighter with a picture of a Kitten on the side, and a key that looked like a locker key from the Ritz-Carlton Tennis Garden.

So, she *had* been at the Tennis Garden on the night she died. Taz had kidnapped her—or killed her—before she even had a chance to get her things from the locker. Bastard.

Mindy was ecstatic to have these small things of her sister's, but she had no idea how they would help her get out of there. She clicked the lighter and found it would light, but it was a low blue flame... almost out of fuel. She didn't click it again for fear of running out completely. She opened the lipstick and glossed a little onto her chapped and cracked lips. It hurt a little, but then it seemed to moisturize them somewhat. She was so hungry, she almost bit into the lipstick, but she still had her wits about her enough to know it wouldn't help.

She carefully dumped the rest of Caroline's body out onto the floor of the lighthouse and considered what help the box might be. It was about the size of a trunk you might take to college with you, or maybe on a summer camp trip with the local scout troop. She thought that maybe if she broke the box somehow, she might end up with a sharp piece that she could attack Taz with when he came back... if he came back.

That was as good a plan as any, so she picked up the box and slammed it down on the floor. It banged loudly, but nothing happened. It was well made. She picked it up again and heaved it toward the wall. Nothing. She began flinging it around furiously, bashing it against the wall and over and over on the floor... but it never gave way.

She fell breathlessly to the floor as the box tumbled end over end and landed upside down and wedged up against the wall. Between her heavy breaths, she dry-heaved and gasped for air. She was hyperventilating. She tried desperately to fight off the panic and slow her breathing. She stood up and walked slowly around the room with her head tilted back like a marathon runner. In with the good air, out with the bad.

She paced around the room a few times, until finally, she felt her pulse slow to what felt a normal pace. Her breathing was slowing, so she eased herself down against the wall and tried to think happy, calming thoughts.

“Ha!” she said out loud to the empty room, “Happy, calming thou —”

Her thought never finished, because in her mind she realized the box was sitting next to the wall like a step. She stood and ran over to the opposite side of the room, stepped up onto the box, and screamed. She could see out. The windows were about six feet off the ground and, until now, she hadn’t been able to see outside. She screamed for twenty minutes, until finally her voice left fades as she realized there was no one on the beach below the lighthouse. It was probably too late in the day for anyone to be out, especially this far south on the island.

She stopped yelling, but she kept looking out, watching the waves roll up onto the beach.

She might not be able to get out, but she would see him coming. And she would smash the box on top of his head if he came through that door.

If he never comes back, I’ll probably die of starvation up here.

But at least I’ll see the sunset one last time before I do.

Union Of The Snake

Remington Hoyt Reginald was surprised at how stupid the cops

must have thought he was... they were hiding in plain sight—and in uniform—at his apartment. He wasn't sure what was up, but the police were onto him. Governor Dickerson had obviously figured out some way to get him arrested and taken down, but that was okay. Remington had his bugout bag, his Gram doll, and Pepe (what he had taken to calling his new pet skunk) with him in the car. He rolled past the building and slowed down for just long enough to figure out where he could go.

It had become obvious that the Governor-elect had no intention of naming Remington as his Chief of Staff—hell, he'd gone on TV and named some other senator from Vermont to the post. So, it was time to make good on his threat. He had a friend at a local television station and he'd called him about some explosive information he had on the newly elected Governor. He didn't have digital copies of it, so he'd hit a Kinko's somewhere, scan everything he had, and email it to the reporter. But he couldn't help looking over his shoulder every few minutes, sure he'd see a black SUV, with blacked out windows, following him.

He needed a way to blend in—as if blending in would be easy for a man carrying a doll and a skunk. He could think of only one place where that would be considered normal; the Keys.

He decided he'd head down toward the Keys and make himself disappear, so he pulled his car onto US 1 and clicked on the air conditioning.

"You okay back there, Pepe?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

The skunk tittered and lifted its head. It was snuggling in the blanket Remington had grabbed from the apartment and had its arms wrapped around the Gram doll. He had long since stopped spraying, and Remington wondered if he'd run out... or if he'd become tamed by the pretzels and cheese puffs Remington had been feeding him. Maybe both.

He checked the bag sitting next to him and found it to be empty. Fearing that the skunk would rebel against him if he didn't replenish their food supply, he pulled off at a Food Spot... then thinking better of that decision, he maneuvered around the parking lot to pull into a Mom 'n Pop grocery store next door. Pulling into the first parking place, he turned his car off, but without the AC going he realized he couldn't leave Pepe out here in the burning heat.

He grabbed his Coach Metropolitan Courier bag (made with genuine sport calf leather) from the back seat and tucked the blanked in the bottom of it.

"Sorry, Pepe," he said, gently picking up the skunk, "but I can't leave you outside this time."

The skunk purred and relented... maybe he felt the heat too. Remington folded the flap over the bag and closed the car door. He clicked his fob and went inside. This time he didn't look around, and missed the black SUV pulling in behind him.

Armed with a handheld basket from the front of the store, Remington started shoving in various cheese flavored chips, puffs, and balls, which seemed to be the skunk's favorites. He walked the aisles, choosing a large bag of lightly salted sunflower seeds for himself, and grabbed a few bottles of water from the cooler in the back.

The door dinged at the front of the store and Remington glanced up and saw a man wearing a black t-shirt and black jeans walked in. He wasn't sure what tipped him off that something was up, either the fact the man didn't take his sunglasses off, or the fact he'd raised a shotgun and blew a giant hole in the clerk at the register. Either way, Remington fell to the floor and scrambled back toward the bathrooms.

Dammit, he thought, *that didn't take long*. He was certain that the man must be working for Gil Dickerson. To walk in and murder someone in broad daylight without pause had to be the work of someone with serious connections.

The man began walking through the store as bits of glass and broken pieces of store counter and displays crunched beneath his shoes.

Remington crawled as quietly as he could toward the rear of the store, hoping there was a back door or some place to crawl in and hide.

"Misther Rethginald," the man said with an obvious lisp, "we bosth know how thisth isth going to end."

It felt strange to be both terrified of this assassin who'd been sent to kill him and yet distracted by the man's speech impediment. Not that Remington associated any kind of humor with speech impediments—he'd had trouble pronouncing the letter R for quite a few years of his own childhood—but to hear a deadly hitman

struggling with his death threats... okay, there was no time to be politically correct here.

Remington said nothing, instead just continued to crawl along, trying his best to time his movements with the killer's to mask the noise. He hoped someone would walk in and disrupt the scene, if only for a second. He could feel Pepe scratching against the inside of his messenger bag and hoped the skunk would calm down, but his pet seemed determined to escape.

"My employer isth disthpleasthed with the way you have handled your... arrangement," the man said, continuing to crunch his way through the store.

No shit, Remington thought as he came to the doorway that led to three choices, Women's, Men's or Employees. He chose the third, and scrambled through after shoving open the Employee door. He ducked his head as the man fired his shotgun into the wall. Chunks of sheetrock and wood shattered and fell around him as he stood up and ran. He looked around and found what he was looking for... a giant, walk-in cooler. He figured he could duck in there and be hidden and protected at least for a minute or two. From there, he wasn't sure what the plan was... but he needed time to think.

He jumped up and ran toward the cooler. Jerking open the door, he jumped inside and ran to the back, where boxes of ice cream treats, popsicles, frozen candy bars, and frozen drink mixes sat on crates. The floor of the metal cooler was sticky from the residue of what looked like a recent spill of something cherry or strawberry flavored, and Remington felt the skunk start scratching at the inside of the bag, probably smelling the sweet stuff on the ground.

"Not now, Pepe," Remington whispered into the edge of the bag.

Thankfully it seemed to work, and the animal quieted down. Remington crouched behind the last shelf unit in the cooler and stilled himself. He strained to hear any sounds coming from beyond the closed door. Over the unit's condenser humming continuously, he could barely hear the footsteps coming closer and closer.

"Misther Rethginald," the man in black called from outside the door, "there isth nowhere to hide. I have you trapped insthside this room and it will not end well for you if you continue to try to ethscape."

The cooler apparently achieved its desired temperature and clicked off for a second. Other than a small orange glow coming from a light switch inside the door, Remington had no way to see his surroundings. He felt around for a weapon of some sort, not sure what good any of these confections would do against the man's shotgun. He briefly considered throwing a box into the man's face and trying to shove past him out the cooler door, but that likely wouldn't work.

He'd probably be expecting something like that and would just deflect the box and promptly blow a hole clean through Remington's chest. The stainless-steel shelves looked as if they might provide a pole or shelf bracket that could be used as a weapon, but upon trying to loosen one, he found them too well put together. The metal wouldn't budge.

Remington began to feel as if this was it... the end. And out of nowhere, in the dead silence of the dark cooler, his cell phone began to ring. Loudly.

Shit, shit, shit, Remington said, searching frantically in his bag for his phone to shut it off.

Outside, he heard the assassin laugh.

"It stheemths that you have a cthell phone call, Mистер Rethginald."

Dammit, Remington thought as he pushed Pepe aside, found the phone, and silenced it. Looking at the number briefly, he saw it was from a contact he'd entered in his phone as G.D. Gil Dickerson. Most likely, the Governor was checking to see if his hitman had completed the job. On top of all of this, Pepe began to chirp wildly, apparently tired of being trapped in a messenger bag.

"Thisth game is over, Mистер Rethginald," came the man's voice, just outside the cooler door now.

And suddenly, a plan flashed into Remington's mind. He was reminded of the first time he'd met Pepe, back in his apartment... and how incapacitated he'd been by the smell of the skunk. He heard the man's hand take hold of the cooler door handle and the slight creak of the hinge.

"Sorry, Pepe," Remington said softly.

He closed the messenger back flap over the top of the skunk, positioned himself in the center of the cooler in front of the door, and waited silently.

The door clicked and then the man hesitated.

"I'm going to open thisth door, Mистер Rethginald," the man said through the crack, "and we're going to talk thisth out like stheriousth adulths."

"I wouldn't do that," Remington said, holding the bag out in front of him.

He crouched low to the floor in a sprinter's stance. The door swung open and Remington pounced. He leapt forward, keeping below under the man's shotgun barrel. The blast went off above him, deafeningly loud inside the cooler, sending the skunk into hysterics.

Remington shoved past the man, tumbling him backward. As he jumped over him, he opened the messenger back and dumped the enraged and frightened skunk onto his head. He could almost feel

Pepe loading up for the mother of all stink blasts, but he didn't wait to see what would happen—he just ran as fast as he could for the front door.

Behind him he heard a scream and thought at first that it might be Pepe... but the longer it went on, he realized it was the assassin.

He had no idea what was happening in the cooler, but he could suddenly smell the skunk spray, and it was strong, even out here. He burst through the front door and ran to his car.

Opening the glove box, he reached in and grabbed his .22 pistol. It wasn't much, but at least he had some kind of weapon.

Inside the store, he heard bodies thrashing and things smashing, and it sounded as if a bull had been let loose inside and was destroying everything in its path.

Within seconds, even from behind the store's glass door and windows, the reek of skunk began to drift out and Remington knew it would be impossible to breathe inside. He pointed his gun at the door and waited.

The noise continued inside, as did the screaming. Suddenly, the front door slammed outward and the assassin came charging out, his shotgun in one hand while the other hand was tugging at his face.

Pepe was clinging to the man's head and appeared to be biting and clawing and spraying wildly. Blood ran down the man's cheeks in dark rivulets.

"Get thisth mother fthuckin' thskunk the fthuck off of me!!" he yelled and a random blast roared from his shotgun.

Remington pointed his tiny gun at the man. He aimed low to keep from hitting Pepe. He fired once, and the shot punctured the man in the right thigh. He stumbled to a knee and howled in pain. But it wasn't enough to stop him. Pepe was circling around the man's head scratching and clawing, and the swirl of hair and blood almost made Remington gag... or maybe it was the stunning amount of spray coming from Pepe.

He sprayed and sprayed and sprayed... all over the man's head. Remington knew he was a little more immune to the smell than most, but it was strong... very strong. As if on cue, the man yelled and vomit spewed from his mouth in wild arcs.

"Oh, damn," Remington muttered.

He raised his pistol, now almost hoping to put the man out of his misery, but he was still afraid of hitting the skunk. He aimed at the man's chest, as high as he felt he could without aiming at Pepe. He pulled the trigger and the man jerked backward as if he'd been hit in the chest with a sledgehammer.

He laid on the ground groaning. Pepe was sitting on top of the man's chest, licking the blood off his paws. Remington kept the gun

pointed at the man and walked closer.

The gory sight of the man's head was pretty gruesome, and Remington didn't take long to examine it... but this guy wouldn't be coming after him anymore. It looked like both of his eyes were clawed out, the assassin likely blinded. The smell on the man's head was staggering. Remington had no idea Pepe could eject that amount of pungent spray. It almost knocked him over as he checked the man over. His nose was a bloody pulp and his mouth was covered in bile and foam. He convulsed and vomited again. Remington grabbed the man's shotgun and opened the messenger bag on his shoulder. Pepe jumped in.

Remington left the man moaning in pain on the sidewalk by the grocery store. He jumped in his car, wondering if the guy would survive or not, but not waiting around to find out. In the distance, sirens began to wail. Someone had called the police upon hearing the gunshots. Remington screeched out of the lot and clicked open his phone. He dialed the number labeled G.D.

The familiar voice of Governor Gil Dickerson came onto the line. "Is it done?"

Remington was furious. He felt like screaming, but he held his composure. After counting to ten, he calmly answered.

"Oh, it's done alright," he said. "Your political life is done, I mean. Your private life is done. Everything you've started is done. You are finished. You're going to jail... or maybe worse, before I'm through with you, Governor Dickerson."

The line was silent for a time, and Remington could almost see the shock through the phone.

"We had a deal," Remington said. "Everything was going to work out just fine. But no. You had to screw everything up by sending a cut-rate hitman to try and take me out." Remington heard Gil start to stammer on the other end, but he continued. "All you had to do was appoint me to a cabinet post. Hell, I would've even negotiated what post, if only you had come to me before sending this asshat to kill me."

"But I—" Gil stuttered.

"Shut the hell up," Remington interrupted him. "But no. Now it's all over. I'm going to release everything I have, and it'll be all over the news by tomorrow. Say goodbye to your wife, say goodbye to your friends, say goodbye to your life."

There was a moment of silence, and Remington wondered if the man was having another heart attack. He'd seen on the news that the man had what they were calling an *incident*.

Good riddance, he thought. But then Gil came back to the line, wheezing raggedly.

"But I didn't send him," he whispered. "I had nothing to do with it. You have to believe me. It was Hardy, he sent the Snake."

Remington almost laughed. The Snake. Like a bad movie villain... the Snake had a lisp... He had no idea who this Hardy was, but he didn't care.

"I don't give a rat's ass who sent him," he growled. "You're going to jail, Governor."

"Wait!" Gil shouted. "Just wait. Give me a second to think."

Remington started to hang up, but then decided to see what could be salvaged out of this cluster of a situation.

"You s-s-said you didn't c-care if it was another p-p-position," Gil stuttered, "I can think of something. I haven't f-filled them all yet."

Remington paused. Maybe it wasn't too late. But then again, he had tried to get him killed... or at least one of his colleagues had sent an assassin. And it was pretty obvious they'd just send another one. He needed to know more.

"Who's this Hardy person?"

"Hardy," Gil said quickly, "James Hardy. Senator from Vermont. It was his boat. The one that Jackie was on when I—"

He stopped short, probably realizing he'd said too much.

Remington's mind clicked into high gear. This was what had made him a top-notch, highly-paid private investigator. His mind flashed to the file he had on Gil Dickerson, and then he saw it; his way to the political office he wanted was clear.

"Tell Hardy I'm onto him," Remington said, and felt himself grinning. "I have pictures of the boat. All I need is to trace the registration numbers on the bow and I've got him. It doesn't matter if the boat never shows up. I know it existed, and that Jackie Ranchero-Doral disappeared on it. Hell, I could probably pin the murder on him, if I really wanted to."

The phone was silent. Gil Dickerson was clearly chewing on this information.

"What is it you want?" he finally said.

Remington could hear the resignation in his voice. This had turned out better than he'd hoped. Now he had power over two powerful political figures. He didn't know who this James Hardy was, but if the man was sending assassins, he was deep into the machinations behind the elite in Washington.

"Secretary of State," Remington said.

"But I can't—" Gil protested.

"Yes, you can," Remington said, "and you will. Or I take both you and Hardy down."

The line was silent.

"Okay," Gil said quietly, almost a whisper. "You win. I will do it as

quickly as I can. But I just want you to know, you will be ending the respected career of Leslie Lee VanAtter. She has been the—”

“I don’t care,” Remington interrupted him, “just do it.”

He heard Gil breathing heavily on the other end of the line. He worried again about the man’s heart giving out. It wouldn’t do to give the Governor a heart attack.

“This will all be over soon,” he said in a calming voice. “Once this is done, the evidence I have will disappear into a safe deposit box where it will rot for all eternity.”

“Good,” Gil Dickerson said, then sighed heavily. “I’ll take care of it on Monday.”

Remington clicked the phone off and inhaled deeply. Not only was he getting used to the smell of skunk, he was actually starting to like it. He looked over his shoulder to see Pepe sleeping in the back seat, curled up with the Gram doll in his arms.

The Beginning Of The End

Governor Gil Dickerson was in his new office, typing out the order to fire his current Secretary of State—a woman who had served in that office for years with a huge favorable popularity rating—and replace her with Remington Hoyt Reginald. His hands shook as he typed, knowing he was in a no-win situation. By firing Leslie Lee, he was going to erode public opinion of his first weeks in office. He was also losing her as a valuable political ally. She would likely be shocked, and definitely hurt. Most of her supporters would follow her in opposing him in the next election, thus, Florida would likely go to the other yet-to-be-determined presidential candidate. He was committing political suicide.

But then again, it was obviously better than the alternative. A life sentence in jail at best, the death penalty at worst. He wondered again how he'd gotten tangled up in this mess... and wondered if he'd ever get out of it.

Suddenly his office door flung open wide and his newest intern—a young man straight out of Harvard—burst in, looking apologetic yet frantic.

“Governor,” he said through ragged breaths, “you’re going to want to see this.”

Gil cocked his head to the said. “What? What is it?”

“On the TV, sir,” the intern said, and beckoned him to follow.”

The office he'd taken over didn't have a television in it, a holdover from the last Governor. He'd have that remedied soon, knowing how important it was to keep on top of the news. He walked into the hall, and found everyone almost jogging toward the conference room.

“Can you believe it?” someone shouted up ahead of him. “They found her!”

Gil quickened his pace to catch up, and pushed his way into the room. The TV was on FNN and Fox Witzer was standing in front of a giant video screen, emblazoned across the bottom of which, in huge letters, were the words: BREAKING NEWS.

The conference room was full of staffers and interns, and the chatter was loud. Gil couldn't hear what Fox was saying.

He grabbed the remote and turned it up as he said, in a raised voice, "Quiet down, people."

Fox Witzer was animated, but still retained his news anchor cadence. "Just moments ago," he said, "Jackie Ranchero-Doral, the missing intern from Gil Dickerson's senatorial staff, took the stage from Raulerson Hospital in Okeechobee, Florida."

Gil froze. The remote dropped from his hand. The room full of people fell dead silent.

On the video screen behind Fox Witzer, an image of a press conference appeared. The woman hadn't started speaking and the anchor was still talking over the feed.

"She is alive and well, apparently recuperating from a boating accident on Lake Okeechobee." Witzer looked down at his notes. "We have confirmation that she has several broken and missing teeth, a broken jaw, and—"

He stopped and put his hand to his ear. Behind him, the woman at the podium covered with microphones had begun speaking.

"Let's go live to Raulerson Hospital and listen in." Witzer stepped away from the video screen and the image enlarged to full screen.

Gil Dickerson could not believe what he was seeing. It was her, Jackie Ranchero-Doral. The woman he had brutally punched—apparently breaking her jaw and removing teeth—and then tied up and sent to the bottom of Lake Okeechobee. He wondered if he was having a nightmare. This couldn't be happening. He had watched her sink to the bottom of the lake.

"Geezus Christ," he mumbled.

One of the interns near him said. "It's true! It must be a miracle!"

Gil faked a smile and nodded.

Turning toward the screen, he watched in horror, waiting for this woman to nail him to his cross. It was over. She would tell the world what he had done to her and that would be the end of it all. He would go to jail for attempted murder, and spend the rest of his days rotting in a cell.

He inhaled deeply. It was almost a relief... no more lying, no more hiding. It was all about to be out in the open.

He pulled out a chair from under the large conference table, and sat down. The intern put his hands on his shoulders and tapped them in a celebratory rhythm. Gil watched as his future unraveled.

"Thank you all for coming," Jackie said, dipping her head toward the microphones. "It's been an unbelievable couple of days and I'll try to fill you all in on what's been going on."

She didn't sound like the jaded intern Gil remembered. She didn't

sound like the Jackie that urged him to rub sunscreen all over her body. She sounded... like a nice girl.

"Several days ago," she continued, "I woke to see the sun streaming into my room at the Raulerson Hospital. Thanks to the doctors and nurses, I was kept alive after an unbelievable accident."

Here it comes, thought Gil.

"Apparently, I had been out boating on Lake Okeechobee and lost control... or hit a buoy, or something like that. Anyway, the boat is gone, probably at the bottom of the lake. I sustained massive injuries to my head and face, all of which have been painstakingly repaired by the fine staff here at the hospital."

It was true, she looked amazing, considering the damage he'd done to her face.

"And as far as I know," she said, "I spent a long time under the water. As in... I drowned."

A few hands shot up from the reporters in the crowd. She dismissed them by holding up a hand.

"I was clinically dead when I was pulled from the lake." Her voice cracked slightly. "My body was recovered by two young men—thank you, Nathan and Justin—who performed CPR on me." She paused for a moment and waved to the two boys in the crowd. "And, by some unbelievable chance," she said, "they were able to expel the water in my lungs and get my heart beating again."

The crowd cheered and some people slapped the boys on the back.

"I remained in a coma after the rescue, and the doctors were sure I had sustained brain damage from being under the water for such a long period of time. Basically, they were waiting for me, for Jane Doe, to die," she said, exhaling deeply. "And that's when I saw the light."

She gestured to a man standing behind her with the doctors and nurses. He had his hands folded behind his back and smiled toward her.

"Brant Reginald brought me back to life," she said, and urged the man to step forward.

He was stout, like an ex-football player, and deeply tanned, his salt and pepper hair brushed back on his slightly receded forehead, and with his blue eyes... blue eyes that glinted in the sunlight, it made for great TV.

He stepped forward and took a very slight bow, and then jumped back into the line of people in white coats and scrubs.

She began to speak again, but Fox Witzer broke in with a dossier of Brant Reginald. He documented his time at the Heavenly Father's Holy Sanctuary Church of Fairhope, a wildly popular television church, with a huge following in Alabama and online. He laid out the details of Brant's fall from grace and his resignation from the church,

adding that the man had disappeared, not only from the congregation, but apparently, from the state of Alabama altogether. The screen showed a video clip of the man with his hand on a young wheelchair-bound girl's forehead with his eyes closed, seemingly in prayer. This was followed by her leaping out of the chair, *healed* of her ailment. The screen flicked back to Fox Witzer, who was clearly dubious of the video, and he began to detail the many lawsuits that began to pop up after the case of Aliah Ranchero...

Fox Witzer stopped mid-sentence. He hadn't seen this coming. There was some sort of bizarre connection here, but he didn't know what it was. He drew his finger across his neck in a quick slice to signal his producers to cut his mic. They must not have received the message, because he remained live.

"Let's listen in again as Jackie continues her amazing story," he said quickly, and walked briskly off camera.

The video feed of Jackie Ranchero-Doral appeared full screen again. She was taking questions from the reporters.

"Who were you boating with that day?" a reporter called.

And that's when it hit him. The big one. The pain stabbed Gil Dickerson so hard in the chest that he was thrown from his chair. He clutched his heart as the interns and staff around him all raced to his side.

He watched through the fog of his vision going black as they all ran around trying to figure out what was happening. Gil knew. He was dying. His heart had just exploded. Perhaps it was better this way. Jackie Ranchero-Doral was about to nail him, and he would likely go to jail until he died. He didn't want that. And this way Sandy could hate him after he was gone and he wouldn't have to be there to deal with that. He could barely hear the television as the hole around his vision began closing tighter and tighter and tighter until he couldn't see anything. The pain in his chest was unbearable and he couldn't feel his arms or his legs. This was it... the end.

And then he heard Jackie answer the question.

"I'm not sure," she said, "maybe just me? I'm sorry, I still don't have any recollection of that day."

She didn't know. She had no idea that Gil had tried to kill her that day. He heard a doctor confirm that it was unlikely she would ever regain her memory of that day. It was gone. Sunk, all the way to the bottom of Lake Okeechobee.

Gil Dickerson smiled. At least Sandy wouldn't hate him after he was gone.

He closed his eyes and slipped away.

Broken Promises

Remington Hoyt Reginald could not believe what he was seeing

unfold on the televisions in the Dave's Isle Sports Bar and Grill. His whole world was falling apart right on live TV for all to see. In a shocking turn of events, the heretofore dead intern, Jackie Ranchero-Doral, who had been having an adulterous relationship with Governor (then Senator) Gil Dickerson, whose apparent beating and murder at the hands of the Governor he was using as blackmail against the man to attain a powerful political appointment in his cabinet, was standing at the podium in front of the Raulerson Hospital in Okeechobee. Whew.

And on top of that, a split-screen view of the Governor's offices in Florida showed a menagerie of ambulances, fire trucks, police cars, and black, government SUV's. Something was wrong with the Governor, but the news organizations weren't reporting what exactly it was.

Remington had a friend in the office who'd said Dickerson was dead as a doornail after having a massive heart attack while watching the Ranchero press conference.

"Of course, he did," Remington mumbled over his glass of iced tea.

"Scuse me?" asked the girl behind the bar.

"Oh, nothing," Remington said and smiled. "Wonderful tea. Could I get a refill?"

She arched an eyebrow and filled his cup from a nearby pitcher. He took a sip and smiled broadly. When she walked away, he turned his attention back to the TVs and wondered what the hell to make of all this madness playing out on FNN.

He'd just been attacked by a hitman sent by someone named James Hardy to protect Gil Dickerson, but now Gil was (presumably) dead. On top of that, Jackie Ranchero-Doral—who was alive—did *not* remember the attack by the deceased Governor that had started all of this mess. So, now there was no crime, except for the assault of Mrs. Ranchero by Mr. Dickerson, but Mr. Dickerson was dead. Sure, there

had been a cover-up by James Hardy... but he was covering up a murder that didn't actually happen. His plans of blackmailing his way into office were officially kaput, over, gone.

"Dammit," he hissed, and banged his fist on the bar.

"Hey, buddy," the waitress called down to him, "settle down!"

"Oh, sorry," he said, pointing to the TV, "it's just that I really liked Governor Dickerson."

"Yeah?" Her demeanor changed instantly. "I liked him too. I voted for him... twice."

Remington raised his tea glass. "Here's to Governor Dickerson, may he rest in peace."

As he took a sip he looked back up at the screen. He immediately spewed tea all over the bar, and all over the girl.

"Holy hell!" she yelled. "What in the hell was that for?"

He never heard her shouting. He was staring at the screen. On the left side of the TV, the Jackie Ranchero-Doral press conference was being played back, and the portion of the video that stopped Remington in his tracks was the moment Jackie invited Brant Reginald to step forward.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle," Remington whispered. "Dad?"

As sure as the sun shines and the grass is green, there he was... the esteemed shepherd of the Heavenly Father's Holy Sanctuary Church of Fairhope, Alabama. Remington watched as they described his father's downfall from the church and how he'd disappeared for a few days, only to resurface down in Okeechobee. And apparently, according to Mrs. Ranchero's account, he had healed her.

"Bullshit," Remington shouted.

"You're damn right it's bullshit," the waitress said, wiping her face. "You're outta here, buddy."

"Oh, oh..." Remington said, realizing what he'd done. "I'm so sorry. Here take this. Keep the change."

He gulped the rest of the tea while catching the last few minutes of the broadcast, and deciding maybe a trip out to Lake Okeechobee was in order, he stood up and walked out to his car, peeking a look in the back window. He'd left it running with the AC on, and Pepe was snuggled up in the blanket. Sliding in as quietly as he could, he put the car in gear and pulled out. He opened his phone to start the G.P.S. toward Raulerson Hospital, and saw he'd missed a message. It was from Taz.

-We gotta talk

No shit, Sherlock, Remington thought, *Jackass probably still wants money.*

That last thought jolted Remington back to the realization he still had the Colpiller case to work with. And now, without the Dickerson

case, Taz didn't have anything to hold over his head. In fact, Taz was now just a piece of shit murderer trying to get money from a man who had nothing else to lose.

Remington realized if he could figure out what Taz had done with the Colpiller girls (Caroline's body and hopefully kidnapped Mindy), return them to their father, solve the case, and turn Taz in, he could collect the healthy paycheck from Jack Colpiller and get revenge on him, all in one fell swoop.

-Talk now. Where is Mindy?

-Meet me. Alone. I'll take you to her.

Yeah right, Remington thought, *and then kill me too?* Taz was trying to lure him to whatever killing hole he'd used for the girls and get rid of any evidence he had about the crime.

But Taz was probably too stupid to figure out that Remington had guessed his plan. The private investigator wasn't defenseless, if he wasn't ambushed... like he was by the Snake. He'd have Taz take him to where he was keeping Mindy and Caroline's body, apprehend him, and take him in. He could still be a hero.

-Ok, where?

-Stiltsville. Yellow and green house.

Remington sucked air through his teeth. Of course. Stiltsville was a collection of old houses about a mile off of Cape Florida and accessible only by water. A perfect place to hide a body and commit a murder. No one would ever hear the victim scream. And these days, no one lived out there. The houses had all been annexed as a part of the Biscayne Bay National Park. It made perfect sense.

Remington turned his car around and headed out to Key Biscayne.

He made a quick call to Jack Colpiller. Jack picked up on the first ring.

"Where the hell are you?" Jack didn't even say hello. "And why the hell was Taz at your apartment?"

Oops, Remington thought. He was sharp enough to respond quickly.

"Bastard broke into my place," Remington said. "Found out I was onto him and tried to steal the evidence I had."

"Got it," Jack said.

"But I've been following him," Remington lied, "and I know where he is and where he's holding Mindy."

"Go," he said quickly. "What've you got?"

"On the water," Remington said. "I need a boat."

"I'll call ahead to the yacht club," Jack said. "Where?"

"Stiltsville," Remington answered, "and I'm headed there now to meet Taz. I'll have him in custody before morning."

"Yes!" Jack Colpiller almost yelled. "Thank you, Mr. Reginald."

“My pleasure, Mr. Colpiller,” Remington replied. “I’ll expect my deposit by tomorrow afternoon?”

“Of course,” Jack said. “Thank God.”

Remington hung up. He hadn’t promised Mindy would be alive. He hoped she still was, but that wasn’t part of the deal. The deal was he would find Caroline... and now Mindy. He clicked back to the text message with Taz.

-On my way

-Alone

-Yes, alone

-If not, Mindy gets it

-I’m alone

It wasn’t exactly a lie; he would be alone... except for Pepe. He wasn’t sure what to expect, but he knew Jack would rally the cavalry. He hoped it would be just in the nick of time to pick up the captor and captee from Stiltsville. Remington clicked open his .22 pistol. One bullet. Well, Taz didn’t have to know that. Hopefully it would be enough to subdue him and take him in... hopefully.

-Good. Don’t try any funny business

Remington didn’t bother responding. He just drove as fast as he could without attracting any police attention.



THE KEY BISCAYNE YACHT CLUB was normally much nicer than it appeared today. There was a massive construction project underway and there were only a few boats in the water, one of which was Jack Colpiller’s massive Ylang Ylang Falcon. It was a daunting sight, but Remington didn’t have time to be daunted. He jumped on board after procuring the keys from the dock commander, and the big boat roared as he fired it up and backed it out of its slip.

This was the life. Remington wondered just how much money Jack Colpiller had... millions... maybe billions. He checked the G.P.S. coordinates and rammed the throttle forward. The boat was so powerful it felt like it might take off and fly out of the water. Stiltsville was all the way on the opposite side of the island, but he could close that distance in under an hour in this beast.

Pepe slept soundly, still tucked into Remington’s messenger bag. He hadn’t let go of the Gram doll since they’d left the apartment. Remington smiled; maybe this was what it felt like to have children. Pepe had just adopted the doll and the blanket and Remington was happy that someone else enjoyed them too. And he was happy that Pepe seemed to like *him* as well. He reached down and stroked the skunk, who purred lightly and arched his back.

The trip to Stiltsville was shorter than Remington thought, and he quickly spotted the yellow and green house as he slowed to wake speed among the shallows. He wondered idly if the boat would ground out, but it didn't... the tide was still high.

Taz's boat, a small dinky, was parked on the inside of the dock beneath the house. He'd probably parked it there so it would be harder to see from the water. Remington drifted the Falcon toward the dock and expertly reversed just enough to have it lightly touch the buoyed side of the boat.

Taz was standing out on the dock and waving him in. He didn't see any kind of gun or weapon on him... *this guy is dumber than I thought*. He draped the messenger bag over his shoulder and ran out on the bow to toss a line to Taz, who grabbed it and looped it around a cleat. He did the same from the stern. Remington lowered a step-ladder and eased down onto the dock.

"G'day, mate," Taz said without humor.

"Where are they?" Remington asked.

"Inside," Taz said and pointed up to the house.

He turned and walked to a ladder that led up to the raised deck surrounding the house. Remington followed. When he reached the top of the ladder, Taz turned around suddenly.

"Gimme the bag," he said, and motioned toward the messenger bag.

Remington raised his hands. "Taz, I don't think you want me to do that."

"Gimme the fookin' bag," he said through gritted teeth. "You think I'm fookin' stupid? You could have a gun in there."

Remington could feel the gun tucked into his sock, so he shrugged and handed the bag to Taz. Taz didn't open it, and simply pointed to the door of the house. Remington turned the knob and went inside.

The house didn't have the typical furniture one would expect; in fact it didn't have any furniture at all. That made sense, as the houses had all been vacant for several years. As he looked around, alarm bells sounded in his mind. There wasn't any furniture, and there weren't any doors leading to other rooms. The house was a shell. And there wasn't anyone else in the room either. *Shit*, Remington thought, *a trap*. But he kept his cool and decided to act like nothing was up.

"So, how we gonna handle—"

He turned as he spoke, just in time to see Taz's tennis racket slam into his face. He felt the bones in his left cheek crack. He slumped to the floor and tried desperately not to lose consciousness. If he did, he was a dead man. The racket cracked the back of his skull and he slammed face first onto the floor.

"Noooo..." he moaned.

“What the fook?” Taz shouted suddenly.

Remington was able to lift his head just enough to see Taz holding the messenger bag outstretched at arm’s length. The flap was open and Pepe was emerging. The skunk looked like he’d just been woken up... and wasn’t too happy about it. He lifted his tail and sprayed hard. Remington smiled through the pain, smelling the extreme stench fill the small house.

“Geezus Croist!” Taz yelled and flung the bag away.

Pepe jumped at him and scratched his arm and tried to sink his teeth into Taz’s hand. But the tennis pro was too quick. He flung the skunk hard against the back wall. Pepe fell to the floor, motionless.

“*Oh, no... not Pepe,*” muttered Remington.

Taz was furious. “Are you freakin’ kidding me?!” he yelled. “Who carries around a damn skunk!!”

He grabbed the handle of his tennis racket and raised it over his head. This blow would certainly kill him, Remington thought.

With every bit of strength he could muster, he reached down into his sock, pulled out the .22, and raised it at Taz and fired.

The bullet caught Taz in the face. It tore off half his cheek, and Remington saw charred flesh and teeth in the opening. He stumbled back and dropped the tennis racket. He tried to speak, but then grabbed the side of his face and screamed something completely unintelligible then ran toward the door.

As Remington heard the smaller boat crank up, he finally lost consciousness.

Taz was probably on his way to kill Mindy. But if she wasn’t here... where the hell was she?

This Girl Is On Fire

Mindy Colpiller was on the brink of passing out due to extreme dehydration. During the daytime, the heat that radiated in through the large, circular bank of windows was excruciating. The sun was setting now, but she was afraid that if she passed out tonight she might never wake up. Scooting on her butt around the edge of the wall, she was able to stay in the shade for most of the day, but the super-humid, greenhouse-heated air inside was stifling to say the least. She felt like she was breathing hot, sticky vapor.

She had long since given up trying to escape her prison, and had decided Taz was probably not coming back. The fear of dying up here... alone... in dehydration shock and starvation had long since given way to the thought that maybe just laying down and going to sleep might not be so bad. It would definitely be better than the horrible fate Caroline had suffered.

An image of Taz's disgusting face filled her mind. She hated that bastard for what he had done to her sister... and now what he was doing to her. Though her rage for him was strong, if he came back now, her strength to do anything about it was gone.

She'd long since used the last of her sister's lipstick to keep her lips moist. Now they were cracked, dry and bleeding. Her eyes were dry too, and when she rubbed them it felt like they were full of sand. She knew she was in deep trouble when she started shivering for no reason... in the one-hundred-degree plus temperatures at the top of the lighthouse.

She'd tried in vain to hurl the oil box at the windows in an effort to break one, but naturally, being constructed to withstand hurricanes and tropical storms, the glass was unbreakable. And it was difficult to throw the box with any force because it was slimy with Caroline's blood and the oil residue from the lighthouse's ancient fuel.

She had eventually given up on that plan too, and placed the box back against the wall.

She'd carefully placed all of Caroline's remains back in the box. It

had taken a while, as she had to take frequent breaks to keep from getting sick as she did it. Her poor sister was unrecognizable in this state. She felt herself crying, even though moisture did not come out of her eyes. Placing the lid back on the box, she knelt and prayed for her sister to feel peace.

She would almost certainly be joining her soon.

And that's when the hallucination came...

Bonnaroo, 2012.

Caroline had convinced Mindy to join her on a trip up to Manchester, Tennessee, to experience the music festival.

"The lineup is amazing this year," Caroline told her, "Radiohead, Janka Nabay & the Bubu Gang, Phish, Sister Sparrow, and Kenny Rogers. Kenny Freakin' Rogers is gonna be there!"

Mindy agreed to go after hearing Kenny would be there. She didn't know any Radiohead or Phish songs, and she hadn't even heard of the rest of the bands. But whenever the opening chords of *The Gambler* came on, she sang along with every word.

The drive up to Tennessee should have been a warning to stay away. A tractor trailer dropped a huge metal beam in front of them and they couldn't avoid it without running off the road. It flattened two of their tires in one fell swoop. Thank goodness for Triple A. But they'd been in the deadlands of South Georgia when it happened, so it took a good three hours for the tire replacements to arrive and for the mechanic to put them on. Apparently, they didn't drive Porsches in South Georgia.

Once they were back on the road it was smooth sailing, and Caroline used the time to educate Mindy on the more popular songs of the headliners that they would see.

Upon arrival, Caroline had done nothing but seek out the best weed, and had started smoking right away. She was a good pothead though, laid-back, fun, and happier than she was most other times. But when night fell, she'd been coerced into a tent where much stronger substances were going into mouths, under tongues, and into veins. Mindy decided to sit that one out. She wandered around the grounds, enjoying the music—most of the time—until she found a really cute guy playing a guitar and singing. He sounded great and looked even better, so she'd plopped down and sat in the circle of people he'd attracted until late into the night.

As it turned out, he was a perfect gentleman, too. Mindy had been surprised he hadn't invited her into his tent, even though he'd been smiling and making eyes at her all night. Instead, he'd asked if she'd like to check out the bonfire with him. It was kind of a big deal, he said. She agreed. He'd reached out and taken her hand and they'd walked toward the gigantic fire like girlfriend and boyfriend. Staring

into the fire, Mindy had laid her head down on his shoulder and drifted off to sleep.

It was the best night's sleep she'd gotten in months. The early morning strains of music getting started woke her, and she wasn't surprised to find he was gone. She'd walked back to where she thought his tent was, but that was gone too. She then walked back out to the central location of the bonfire—which was still smoldering—and asked around about Caroline.

Someone recognized her name and had directed Mindy to the drug tent. Caroline was bombed. Her shirt was torn and her makeup had run down her cheeks... she'd been crying. The stoners hadn't raped her, but she'd definitely been taken advantage of... and then they'd vanished into the crowd. In the shape they'd been in the night before, they might not even remember it... Caroline barely did. But she remembered enough to know she was ready to go.

Through her tears she'd asked Mindy to drive her home. As they made the long walk back to the car, Caroline had pointed to the pile of embers where the bonfire had been and said she was sad she'd missed it.

Mindy snapped out of the memory. She lifted her head and looked at the box that held Caroline's body. Stenciled on the side was the single word, OIL. Mindy remembered the box had been slick with blood and the remnants of the decades old fuel residue. She looked down at the pile of Caroline's things sitting next to her. She snatched up the lighter and flicked it. The flame danced high and strong above the flint.

She pushed herself up and walked toward the OIL box. She grabbed the edges and dragged it to the center of the room. She slid it directly on top of the locked hatch. She opened the box and noticed the smell of oil more obviously now over the odor of the decaying body of her twin sister.

"I'm sorry Caroline," she said.

Somewhere deep in her mind, it felt like Caroline had said to do it... she would help her sister from beyond even death.

Mindy clicked the lighter and held it to the edge of the box. The flame took some time to get going, and Mindy was afraid the fuel in the lighter would run out. But finally, the edge of the wooden box began to catch. In minutes, it was engulfed in flames at least four feet high. Not quite high enough for someone to see through the windows, but Mindy hoped the flickering glow would be enough to draw some attention.

And she hoped maybe the hatch would burn and give way...

Back In The Saddle

Troy Clint Bodean had been dozing off in the ridiculously plush leather chair in front of the massive seventy-five inch television screen in the Colpiller penthouse apartment when the call came in. They had been waiting downtown for the report from the gaggle of cops that had gone to find Taz. They traced his location to an apartment building in Liberty Heights. Oddly, the apartment in question was empty and reeked of skunk, and was rented to the private investigator Jack Colpiller had hired to find his missing daughter, Caroline.

In the hours that passed, Joe Bond—the detective on the case and an old friend of Troy’s—had reported that nothing new was discovered. They literally had no leads, no clue where Mindy was, no clue where Taz was, and no clue where Remington was... so Joe Bond had suggested they go home and wait. And that’s where they had been until Remington called them and said he knew where Taz and Mindy both were and needed a boat to go get them.

Jack Colpiller was pacing around the room and wringing his hands together. “Dammit,” he said, “I should never have let Remington take my boat. We should’ve gone out there to get my daughter back.”

“No, siree, compadre,” Troy said and held up his hands, “that would have been a really bad idea. What we need to do is call Joe and get every last cop in Miami out here to make sure nothing bad goes down.”

“But you heard Remington,” Jack protested, “if anyone besides Remington shows up out there, Taz will know something is up... he’ll just kill Mindy on the spot.”

Troy stood up. “But if we get Joe and the Coast Guard out on the water over there, Remington can signal them to let them know he’s got her. Then the cavalry can swoop in.”

“You’re right,” Jack said, clicking his phone. “I’ll call Joe now.” As he waited for the call to connect, he said, “And then we’re gonna go borrow a boat and get over there.”

Troy opened his mouth to protest, but Jack turned away.

“Yes, this is Jack Colpiller,” he said. “I need to speak to Detective Bond.”

He listened for a moment, then said, “No, I cannot hold. This is an emergency.”

Another few seconds of listening.

“Are you kidding me?” Jack took the phone away from his ear and looked at Troy. “She said she had to put me on hold to connect the call.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Troy said, shrugging his shoulders.

Jack put the phone back to his ear. After three disconnects and redials and forty-five minutes of blaring hold music, he hung up. “Let’s go,” he said, pointing toward the elevator door.

He walked briskly and urged Troy to follow. They took the elevator down to the lobby, hopped in Jack’s Lamborghini, and raced the two miles to the Key Biscayne Yacht Club. Jack ran in the door and Troy—after carefully extricating himself from the ridiculously low riding sports car—followed.

When Troy finally got to the front door and pushed it open, he saw Jack yelling at the Dock attendant.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” he yelled. “There’s not a single boat here I can take out?”

The young man looked like he might pee his pants.

“Don’t you know who I am?” Jack leaned over the kid’s counter. “This is a matter of life and death.”

“Sir,” said the young man, whose nametag read Steve-O, “I’m super sorry, Mr. Colpiller. We’re renovating the slips and everything is in dry-dock.”

“You mean to tell me *every* boat is out of the water?”

“Yes, sir.” Steve-O held up his hands, palms to the sky. “I’m really sorry, sir.”

Jack Colpiller banged his fist on the counter and the boy jumped. He looked down at his lap and Troy saw that he had actually peed his pants. Walking past the two of them and scanning the marina, Troy saw that it was indeed a ghost town. Nothing.

Jack came up behind him and inhaled deeply. “We’re stuck.”

“Yup,” Troy answered, “looks that way.”

“Dammit.”

“Did you try calling Joe again?” Troy asked.

“I’ll try now,” Jack said, pulling out his phone.

Then he saw it. Out by the gas pumps and banging up against the dock was a small metal Jon boat with the words RENT ME printed on the side.

Jack pointed at it and looked at Troy. “What about that one?”

Troy looked and shook his head. “We’d never make it out there in

that thing. Besides, I've had bad juju with those things ever since... well, for a long time now."

Jack put his mouth back to the phone. "Yes, now listen. This is Jack Colpiller. Don't put me on hold and do *not* hang up."

Troy could hear the person on the line try to protest, but Jack interrupted. "You tell Joe Bond that my daughter is being held captive by a murderer out at the yellow and green Stiltsville house. They can't just show up, or he'll kill her. But if they'll send out the Coast Guard, I'll get word when she's been rescued and let you—"

The voice apparently interrupted him. "Rescued by Remington."

The voice asked another question.

"Remington Reginald," Jack said, getting frustrated, "the investigator I sent after them."

He listened to the voice for a second, then blurted, "Wait, wait, wait, don't—"

He held the phone up to show Troy. "She put me on hold," Jack said incredulously, "can you freakin' believe that?"

Troy shrugged. Jack clicked the phone angrily and shoved it in his pocket. "Well," he said, "what the hell do we do now?"

"I guess we'll just have to wait," Troy said, taking a deep breath, "and hope Remington is able to get Mindy out safely."

"Dammit!" Jack yelled and walked toward the floor to ceiling windows looking out at the ocean. "If only the damn pilot was here."

Troy perked up. "Pilot?"

"Yeah, he's usually here during the week," Jack answered, putting his hands on his hips, "but his sister has an engagement party, or something like that. Hell, I had no idea I'd need—"

"Wait, a pilot for what?"

"The chopper, of course," Jack said, and pointed up.

"You've got a chopper?"

"Yeah."

"On the roof?"

"Yes."

"Let's go."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Wait, you mean to tell me that you can fly a chopper?"

"Yup," —Troy was already headed toward the private elevator door— "learned how back in Afghanistan."

"Hot damn," Jack said running after him.

"You said it."



THE PRIVATE ELEVATOR opened up to the long flat roof on top of the

Grand Bay Resort and Residences building. To the right Troy saw the skyline of Miami across Biscayne Bay starting to light up as night fell. He saw a row of gigantic cruise ships lined up and ready to sail passengers out to a plethora of tropical locations. Beyond those he saw high-rise condominiums and office buildings with deco colors and mirrored glass. South Beach was starting to pulse as well, with parties from all around the world starting to get their groove on. But the only sound he could hear was the wind in his ears and the waves crashing on the beach. He grabbed his hat as a strong gust threatened to steal it off his head.

To the right, he spotted the lower Ritz-Carlton building, and past that the various smaller hotels and apartment buildings. He could almost make out his crap-hole place from up here too. At the end of the long row of sunset reflecting buildings, he could see the Towers of Key Biscayne looking like something out of a Tolkien novel. Past that, it was jungle... mangrove... the wild. He couldn't see the lighthouse from this angle, as it was hidden by the Towers. But they were going to the other side of the island, out to Stiltsville.

"Here," Jack said, holding out a key.

Troy took it and looked down at it. He'd flown the seaplane for his brother down in Key West without incident, but he hadn't flown a chopper since the war. Not since the incident with Harry Nedman. He hadn't experienced any PTSD symptoms—no nightmares, no tremors, no fear—since he'd come back from Afghanistan... until now.

Looking down at the key, he noticed his hand begin to shake. It was just a small tremor at first, but it became so violent that it shook the key right out of his hand.

He looked up at Jack. "I don't know if..."

Jack Colpiller took Troy's hand and held it tight. "Soldier," he said calmly, "this is not the time to flake out on me."

Troy nodded, but he was still shaking.

"Son," Jack said in a commanding voice, "your unit needs you. You are the only one who can get out there and save them. You, and you alone, stand between their life and their death. Do you hear me, son?"

"Yeah," Troy said weakly, "I hear y—"

Jack poked his finger into Troy's chest with force. "I can't hear you! Do you hear me, son?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Troy reflexively snapped a salute.

And that was all it took. He reached down and grabbed the key.

"Good!" shouted Jack. "Now, get your ass in that chopper and get us in the air!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Troy said, and ran over to the chopper.

The helicopter perched on the slightly raised pad was matte black

with two glossy gray stripes running up diagonally along the tail. It was smooth and sleek and futuristic looking. He lifted himself up into the cockpit as Jack ran around to the other side.

Once inside, Troy grabbed the headset, laid his hat aside, and placed them over his ears. He started a pre-flight check and was amazed at the high-tech dash in front of him. This thing was amazing.

Seeing him staring at it, Jack asked, "You okay?"

Troy glanced over at him. "I'm good now. Thanks."

"Good," Jack said and put on his headset. "Now, can you fly this bird?"

"Hell yeah, I can." Troy clicked a few more switches. "What's she called?"

"She's a Eurocopter EC135," Jack said, smiling, "twin-engine rotorcraft. It can be alternatively powered by a pair of Turbomeca Arrius 2B or Pratt & Whitney Canada PW206B engines. Quietest bird in her class and fast as hell. Cost me over four mil."

Troy looked over at him and smiled. "No, I mean... what do you call her?"

Jack laughed. "I call her Betty."

Troy gave him a *thumbs-up* and nodded. "Me likey."

And as they lifted off the platform, he began humming the tune of Black Betty by Ram Jam.

The chopper swooped off the building and Troy found that yes, Betty was indeed fast as hell. The structures lining the beach of Key Biscayne whizzed by on their left and people on the sand below waved as they passed overhead. The sun dipped below the horizon and left Troy flying almost solely by instruments.

"We'll head down past the Towers and then head west," Troy said and pointed toward the buildings. "The mangroves should mask our sound a bit. Once we get across, I'll get up pretty high and we'll wait 'til we hear from Remington."

"Good plan," Jack said, taking out his phone. "Nothing yet."

Less than fifteen minutes later they were circling the group of houses known as Stiltsville. It was dark, but flying this low they could still see well enough to make out the individual homes.

"Jack," Troy said, "which one did he say again?"

"He didn't," Jack answered, sweeping his head around to check all the houses, "but there's no one out here. And I don't see my boat."

"Could he have it hidden beneath one of them?"

Jack shook his head. "Nah, it's too big. It would have to be parked dockside. It's not here."

"Dangit," Troy said, and swept the chopper back around.

Below them the houses perched on stilts above the shallow waters were dark, quiet and abandoned. No lights shone, and there were no

boats parked anywhere. No one was here.

“Call Remington,” Troy said.

Jack dialed the phone. He waited a while, then shook his head.

“Voicemail,” he said.

“Crap,” Troy said, “what now?”

“Hell, I don’t know.”

“Try calling Joe back?”

“That gets us nowhere,” Jack said, “besides, if he got my message, he’s probably got the Coast Guard headed out here anyway.”

“Jack,” —Troy pointed at a number on the screen in front of him—
“we’re gettin’ low on fuel.”

Jack nodded. “Head back. We’ll fuel it up and try again.”

Troy nodded, but he knew it was hopeless. This time of night, they’d have no visuals on the ground or the water. It was pitch black down by the mangroves with no residual light from buildings, streetlights, or cars.

Troy swung around in a wide arc to head back to the Grand Bay. In the distance he could see the Cape Florida Lighthouse. The low flickering of its light dancing off the faceted windows of...

“Jack,” Troy said, and pointed the chopper toward the tall building.

“Yeah?”

“Do you see that?” Troy stuck his finger out.

“The lighthouse?”

“Yeah,” Troy said, “and am I crazy, or is there a light on in there?”

Jack peered through the windshield at the dark shadow of the lighthouse. Orange light danced across the glass.

“I think you’re right,” Jack said, “but there shouldn’t be... there’s no light in there anymore.”

“Somebody’s up there...” Troy said.

His voice trailed off as he remembered something Joe had said about the shoe the police had found with Caroline’s blood on it. There had been a bum brought in for creating a nuisance down at the lighthouse. They’d found the shoe in his things.

“It’s Taz,” Troy said.

“What?” Jack’s face showed confusion. “How do you know that?”

“No time to explain,” Troy said, swooping the chopper in low over the mangroves.

He flew past the lighthouse and out over the water, then circled back. There was definitely a light coming from inside the lighthouse, and down on the beach, resting up on the sand, was a small boat.

Troy pointed at it. “That yours?”

“That hunk of junk?” Jack asked. “Hell no. Mine’s a lot bigger than that.”

Troy had guessed as much, but wanted confirmation.

“Okay, then Taz is here,” he said, “and he’ll have heard us coming.

Jack nodded and started to say something. “I—”

“You’ll be staying in the chopper,” Troy interrupted, “and getting Joe, the Miami P.D., the Coast Guard, Remington, and anybody else with a gun and a badge to get their asses down here pronto.”

Jack closed his mouth and nodded. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m gonna get your daughter back.”

Redeemed

Brant Reginald could hardly believe the events of the past few

days. From his fall from grace at the Heavenly Father's Holy Sanctuary Church of Fairhope, Alabama, to the apparent... alleged... miracle of raising Jackie Ranchero-Doral out of her supposed permanent coma, and finally to the media and social wave that had lifted him back into a respected position in the church.

The same afternoon that the news report had come out detailing the events that happened in Jackie's room on that fateful night, the church had reinstated him. He had received no less than one-hundred-forty-seven offers from churches around the country to take over as their spiritual leader. Sifting through the hundreds and thousands of messages from people all over the country, something became abundantly clear to him... people were hurting—physically and spiritually. His message going forward would be one of honest, faithful, and genuine redemption... not actors pretending to be healed. Any healing that took place would be by the power of God, and not by the power of good production values.

After answering what seemed like two-thousand questions from the press, he'd had some time to hang out with Jackie. The hospital was keeping her there to be sure that everything about her recovery was okay, and by all accounts, she appeared to be in perfect health... except for the minor issue of the memory loss. She'd seen the sad news that her former boss, Governor Gil Dickerson, had apparently died of a major heart attack. She couldn't remember much besides a feeling that she had liked him. Doctors said she might regain some of her memories, but given the miracle that had happened, told her not to worry about it if they never came back.

Brant took Jackie's hand and said he needed to tell her something... and ask for her forgiveness.

"Forgiveness?" Jackie asked in surprise. "Are you kidding me? You gave me my life back. What in the world would I need to forgive you for?"

Brant inhaled deeply. He told her the story of his church and how they had slid into the habit of creating false miracles—for the greater good of showing people the power of Jesus—and how he had met Aliah Ranchero. He admitted that he, along with the board of the church, had conned Jackie's mother into believing she had been healed and further convinced her that her money... *all* of her money... should be given to the church, since God have given her this miracle.

Jackie remained stoic through his telling. He couldn't read what she was feeling. Her face was a mask. He finished with the story of having left Alabama in disgrace. He bent down on his knee beside her bed and tears began to fall from his eyes.

"And so," he said, "I must beg you for forgiveness... because... I am responsible... I alone am responsible for your mother's death."

For a long moment, Jackie said nothing. Brant kept his head lowered and began to pray. He heard Jackie sniff, and looked up to see tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I remember," she said. "I remember the joy we felt when she came home and said she'd been healed. I never put it together that it was you."

Brant expected her to throw him out. Jackie said nothing. He stood up.

"I'll... " he began, "I'll go now. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am. I—"

"No," Jackie said, "you have nothing to be sorry about. If it had been in His plan to heal her, she would've been healed. We can never fully understand what the plan is... whether we happen to be a preacher, or just a follower."

Brant could not believe what he was hearing. As she spoke, he began to come to a greater truth in his heart.

"The time I had with my mother on this earth," Jackie continued, "was precious and priceless. Maybe God needed her in Heaven, and took her home at just the right time."

Brant began thinking about his son, Remington, and how he had thrown him out after the unfortunate accident with his grandmother. Jackie's mother had been taken from her by death, but Remington's family had been taken from him... by ignorance and shallow emotions. The tears came freely and his heart started to pound.

"You know what you need to do, Pastor Reginald," Jackie said, and smiled.

"I do." Brant took her hand, and kissed it.

He told her goodbye and made sure she knew how to get in touch with him after she was released from Raulerson.

"I look forward to seeing your new church," she said as he turned to go, "and the miracles that will flow from your ministry."

Brant nodded and held up a hand to wave goodbye. But his thoughts were on just one thing now; Remington. He opened his phone and saw that he had a missed message from his son.

-Dad?

He quickly typed out a reply.

-I'm here, son

-I need you

An image of a map with a pin in it popped up on his screen. Remington had sent his location.

-On my way

Brant ran out to the parking lot and found the Saint Juneau's old white Buick LeSabre still parked where he'd left it. He jumped in and set the G.P.S. He wasn't sure how he knew... but he knew Remi was in trouble. He drove as fast as the Buick would go, and raced down Highway 27, slowing only to navigate through the tolls. Thankfully, the Saint Juneaus had a Sunpass mounted in the windshield, so he didn't have to dig up the change he needed to get through. He mentally added this to the list of things he'd repay them for when he got the chance.

An hour and a half later, he found the pinpoint on the map at a small apartment building in Hialeah. He jumped out of the car and ran into the lobby and found an older woman sitting in a dark green club chair held together with several strips of duct tape on its edges watching a daytime talk show. She looked up and gasped.

"Well, as I live and breathe," she crowed, "if it isn't the honorable reverend Brant Reginald. I absolutely adore your TV show."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, but didn't bother to explain that he didn't do that anymore. "I need to know which apartment Reginald Hoyt Remington is in."

"He's in 3B," she said, pointing at the elevator, "but you might want to cover your nose. Skunk."

Brant had no idea what that meant, but he ran to the elevator and punched the button. As he waited for the ridiculously slow car to arrive, he heard the woman calling a friend, bragging how she'd just met the Pastor from Fairhope.

Finally, the doors slid open and Brant got a shocking whiff of what the old woman had been talking about. The smell of skunk did fill the decrepit, dirty elevator, but that was the last thing on his mind. He punched the number 3 and waited. He stepped out of the infernally slow elevator and jogged down the hall, noticing the odor of skunk getting stronger and stronger as he approached 3B. He found the door left slightly ajar, and saw a bloody smudge on the doorknob and four bloody finger impressions on the jamb.

He shoved the door open and ran in.

“Remi?” he shouted into the apartment.

He ran toward the bedroom, but there was no sign of his son in there.

“Remi? Where are you?” he shouted into the air.

Listening, he heard a moan come from the other side of the apartment. He saw another door with more blood smudged on it and edged through it. Inside, he found his son. Remington looked as if he’d been in a car wreck or a really one-sided boxing match.

The left side of his head was streaked with blood and his eye was black and nearly swollen closed. The back of his head had a knot the size of a baseball poking through his hair. Remington’s mouth was also swollen and bruised, and he looked like he’d had a ridiculous plastic surgical lip plumping to match the girls down on South Beach. In his lap, of all things, lay a skunk. And in his arms, he clutched a doll, and Brant recognized it as the doll his son had bought for his Gram when she’d been in the hospital. It was then he realized the pain his son had been holding onto for all those years. The suffering he’d experienced when losing his grandmother had only been multiplied when he’d lost his dad... when Brant had sent him away.

Brant raced to his side. “I’m here, Remi,” he said, touching his son’s arm.

“Dad?” Remington groaned. “What took you so long?” Remington’s face curled into what might’ve been a smile. Brant crouched down and gently hugged his son. Even so, Remington winced in pain.

“We have to get you to a hospital,” Brant said, pulling out his phone.

“No,” Remington said, “there’s no time. I can feel it.”

“Feel what?” Brant continued dialing 9-1-1.

Remington grabbed the phone from his father’s hand and slung it across the room.

“It’s too late, Dad.” Remington wheezed and a trickle of blood ran down his chin. “Something inside my skull is broken. I can feel it ripping apart.”

“Son, if we get you to the hosp—”

“Dad, stop,” Remington said, interrupting him. “Just be with me. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Brant reached down and stroked the hair on the Gram doll. He could see his mother, Remington’s grandmother, lying in the hospital bed... slipping away.

“She loved you so much, Remi,” Brant said softly. “Those Sunday afternoons with you were her favorite.”

Tears began to stream from his son’s eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Dad,” he said. “I miss her so much... and... I miss you, too.”

“Son, what happened with her wasn’t your fault,” Brant said. “She had lived her life. Even the doctors said that the fall shouldn’t have hurt her that much.”

“But, I—”

“Shhh,” Brant said. “I should never have turned you away. I was hurt and angry and sad and all of that clouded my judgment.”

“You were always judging me,” Remington said.

“The log in my own eyes,” Brant quoted, “I was wrong. I knew I was wrong the minute you left.”

Brant knelt beside him. “You are my son. You are the person God made you to be, and that is why I love you so much.”

He put Remington’s hand in his and prayed. He knew another miracle was too much to hope for... too much to ask. Brant felt as if God was leveling his final punishment against him. Job had lost everything, and this was his last real possession... his son.

Remington closed his eyes. Brant felt his hand go limp. Behind him, he heard the door of the apartment slam open and someone shouted, “Paramedic! Call out!”

“We’re in here,” Brant yelled back.

Two men ran into the room and immediately began to work on Remington. When they were sure he was breathing and had enough of a pulse, they hauled him onto a stretcher and wheeled him out.

Brant grabbed a nearby messenger bag. He tucked the doll into it and gently lifted the anxious skunk into it as well. They all piled into the back of the ambulance and squealed out of the parking lot.



TWO DAYS LATER, Remington woke up. His doctor was checking his vital signs and shaking his head.

“I have no idea how you made it, Mr. Reginald,” the doctor said as he laid a chart down on the bed at his feet and began listening to his heart. “You should’ve died. The trauma to your head should’ve given you severe brain damage and maybe even spinal cord damage.”

Remington smiled and looked at his dad. Brant winked at him.

“How you managed to drive that boat onto the beach is a miracle,” the doctor said. “You should be really glad that bartender found you there. What was his name?”

“Gino,” Remington said through a throat that felt like sandpaper, “I think he said his name was Gino. Pretty good looking.”

He looked up at his dad, whose eyebrows rose, and then settled down above a broad smile.

“Well,” —the doctor wrapped his stethoscope around his neck and picked up his clipboard— “if you get a chance, you really should

thank him.”

“I will,” Remington said as the doctor walked out.

“Good looking, eh?” Brant asked.

“Just giving you a hard time, Dad.”

Brant lifted the bag to the bed and opened the flap. The skunk jumped out, and crawled immediately onto Remington’s lap. He curled up into a ball and promptly went to sleep.

“How did you come by this little fella?” Brant asked.

“He found me,” Remington said. “I call him Pepe.”

Brant nodded. “I had to bring him along. I was afraid he would spray me if I didn’t.”

Remington laughed and then coughed a few times.

“Easy son, you’ve got a long recovery ahead of you.” Brant rested his hand on his son’s arm.

“I’m just glad you’re here, Dad.”

“Me too.”

Remington inhaled slowly. “So, what’s next for you, Dad? I know you’ve got a lot of choices for your next preaching job.”

Brant shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I’m not sure that’s what God wants for me. I might try to find a little place to rent and just have a few small group meetings. You know, just take it slow.”

“That sounds good,” Remington said. “Where are you thinking?”

“I don’t know,” Brant said, “maybe something down in Coral Gables or over in Doral. They have great golf out there, ya know?”

“High dollar places, Dad.” Remington sucked his teeth.

“Yeah,” Brant said, “I may have to start small, but I might be able get an investor or backer.”

Remington appeared to consider this. “How much are you looking for?”

“Not sure,” Brant said, “maybe a hundred grand?”

Remington smiled. “I think I know where we can get that.”

Brant arched an eyebrow.

“It’s good to see you back, Dad,” Remington said.

“It’s good to be back, son.” Brant touched the medallion on his chest with the engraving of St. Christopher. “And it feels like I’ve finally made it home.”

Throw Down

Troy knew Taz would've heard the helicopter and would know

he was coming. And to get into the lighthouse, there was only one way... up the stairs and through the hatch. He stepped as lightly as he could, but the metal spiral staircase seemed to ring out loudly, with every single footfall echoing throughout the structure.

On his way to the top, Troy tried desperately to figure out some kind of plan. He'd been so quick to get up here that he'd forgotten to grab his gun. He also thought that he might wait for the Coast Guard to arrive... but he gave up on that thought quickly. Taz had to know they were closing in on him, and in his desperation, he might do something stupid... if he hadn't already.

Troy reached the top step and saw that the hatch had been unlocked and hung open.

"I hear ya, Mista Bodean," Taz's voice echoed through the opening, "so ya might as well come on up."

Troy poked his head slowly into the room. There was a smoldering pile of ashes in the center of the room and the air was heavy with smoke. Through the haze, he could barely make out Taz's shape, holding Mindy by the hair. He didn't see a gun or a knife... that was good.

As if reading his mind, Taz said, "I've gotta gun. I grabbed it off ya friend back in Stiltsville."

Dangit, thought Troy. He raised his hands as he climbed all the way up into the lighthouse's upper room.

"I'm unarmed, friend," Troy said, "so just let the girl go and we'll all walk away."

Taz laughed a wheezing, hacking laugh. Sounded like the smoke had gotten to him.

"Yeah," he said, "that ain't happenin'."

He tugged on Mindy's hair, and she cried out in pain. Troy took a couple of slow, steady steps toward him.

"Easy, friend," he said, "let's just not do anything stup—"

“Shut the fuck up,” Taz growled. “Here’s the deal. Me and chicky here are walkin’ outta here togethah. We’re gonna get on that choppah, and you’re gonna take us down to Cuba.”

“Taz,” Troy protested, “you know I can’t do that. The Coast Guard will be here any second and—”

“I said,” —Taz pulled his other hand up, revealing a small pistol— “shut the fuck up.”

Troy halted, and held his hands higher.

“Okay, okay,” he said, “how ‘bout we just calm down first and make a plan.”

“I gotta plan, fool,” Taz said. “Ah’m gonna disappeyah down south o’ the border.”

“Okay,” Troy said, “then what? You got no money, you got no place to stay, whatchu gonna do then?”

Taz seemed to falter at this. It was obvious he hadn’t given it any thought.

“Yer right,” he said, shoving the pistol into Mindy’s cheek, “I’ll get daddy dearest to cash me out, or I’ll blow her fuckin’ head off.”

Okay, Troy thought, *that didn’t turn out exactly how I planned.*

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, big guy,” Troy said, and took another step toward them. “That ain’t gonna work, as they’ll just trace the serial numbers and find you that way. No, what you need is a contact.”

“A contact?”

Troy didn’t know what the hell he was saying, he just let it flow, trying his best to keep Taz distracted until the cavalry rode in and saved the day. “Yeah, bro.” Troy eased closer.

As Taz began to consider this, his focus on Mindy seemed to drift.

“I know a guy with a plane down in Key West who can hook you up,” Troy continued.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, man,” Troy said, and stepped to within four feet of Taz and Mindy, “they don’t give a rat’s ass down there, bro.” He tried to sound like a co-conspirator, a buddy, a confidant. And Taz seemed to be buying it.

“Sweet,” Taz said, “that’s exactly what ah need.”

Troy was able to make eye contact with Mindy for a flash of a second and tried to telepathically get her to understand what he was doing. He thought he saw the slightest, most imperceptible nod of her head.

And then she moved. She slowly reached up with her left hand. Taz didn’t notice. Troy couldn’t tell what she was doing, but he jumped back into the conversation to give her cover.

“Yeah, dude,” he said loudly and with a chuckle. “We once spent a whole month down in Cabo at Sammy Hagar’s bar drinkin’ tequila and

moonshine. Dang bartender thought I was Sammy. Can you believe that?"

Taz laughed slightly with his brow furrowed. Troy wondered if the guy even knew who Sammy Hagar was... but his story was enough to give Mindy time to act. She got her hand up under Taz's, and flicked a lighter. The flame jumped suddenly and burned the hand Taz was holding the gun in. He yelped and dropped it, the gun clattering to the ground.

Mindy rolled away from him and Troy pounced. He'd never played football, but he tried to tackle Taz. He grabbed him around the waist and slammed him back against the wall, though the kid was young and strong, and he drove his knee into Troy's chest and he felt the air whoosh out of his lungs. He stumbled back and almost fell.

Taz took the opportunity and leapt on top of him. He raised his hands and brought them down hard. Troy was barely able to move his head to the side and his hat went flying as Taz struck his shoulder. Pain flared through his arm and Troy wondered if Taz had broken his clavicle.

He brought his knee up under Taz and heaved. The kid flew backward, but didn't lose his feet. He took two steps and swung wildly at Troy. Troy ducked, but he swung again and caught Troy on the left ear. The pain was intense and Troy lost his balance. He rolled through the embers and felt his shirt start to burn. He jerked it off and slung it at Taz, who just grabbed it and threw it aside.

He lunged forward at Troy and tried to kick him, but Troy fell backward, dodging his foot. Unfortunately, his own feet fell through the hatch that still lay open.

He'd gone through the hatch on the opposite side of the steps and his feet dangled above the rail of the stairway, over a one-hundred foot drop to the bottom of the lighthouse.

His fingers scraped for purchase, but there wasn't much to hang onto. Taz realized what was happening and started laughing. He walked toward Troy and raised his foot above his clutching fingers. Troy noted that he had on the same brand of shoe they'd found with Caroline's blood on it. Taz had killed her, and now he was going to kill Mindy.

"Ya know," Troy shouted desperately, "she likes me better!"

Taz froze. "What the fuck are you talkin' about, mate?"

"Mindy," Troy continued. "Doesn't matter what you do, she'll always like me more than you."

Taz's smile turned into a frown.

"Hell," Troy said as he felt his fingers slipping, "she'll probably even call out my name when she's makin' love to you."

Taz's face twisted in rage. "Shut it!" he yelled, and raised his foot

again. “Ah’ll kill ya, you mother—”

Taz’s left eye exploded as Troy heard the bang. The kid slumped to the ground and didn’t move. He looked past Taz’s fallen body to see Mindy, holding up the .22. She’d shot him. A dang good shot too... it wouldn’t have done much damage if she’d have hit him anywhere else. When she saw that she’d made the shot, she passed out, slumping to the floor.

Troy kicked his legs and tried to reach the stairs. He missed and his left hand lost its grip. He lurched downward.

“I got you,” a voice called up.

Troy felt strong arms wrap around his waist, pulling him toward the stairs. Next he felt his feet hit the steps, and turned to look at his rescuer.

The man in front of him stuck out his hand. Troy took it and shook it hard.

“Thank you, sir,” he said.

“Call me Jack.”

Joe Bond and the rest of the Coast Guard guys were right behind him, running up the steps of the Cape Florida lighthouse.

“You bet, Jack,” Troy said, turning to run up the steps. “Now, let’s go get your daughter.”

A New Hope

Remington Hoyt Reginald sat in the first row of the New Hope

church in Doral, Florida. He'd received the wire transfer from Jack Colpiller for the remainder of his payment for finding his twin daughters, Caroline and Mindy. Sadly, Caroline had been killed, but Mindy had been rescued. Remington tried to turn down the payment, but Jack insisted that since the P.I. had been willing to almost give up his life to rescue Mindy, he deserved at least that much.

Since leaving the hospital, he had made a remarkable recovery. He had some blurriness in his left eye, but it seemed to get better with every passing day.

The church wasn't in a standalone building, at least not yet. They had rented a small studio in a shopping center between Milo's Cigars and Utah Bill's Golf Shop. It only held thirty people, who sat on folding chairs, but they filled each and every chair, every Saturday night and Sunday morning.

Remington listened intently as his father addressed the modest congregation. He didn't perform any miracles. He didn't take any offerings. He just spoke about the Bible. And that was what his people wanted to hear most of all.

Remington looked over at the girl sitting next to him. Since meeting her, she'd been a huge part of his recovery. She understood more than most, because she'd been through a similar traumatic experience too.

"Thanks for coming," he said and smiled at her.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," replied Jackie Ranchero-Doral, who smiled back at him.

Hanging on the edge of Remington's chair was a simple burlap messenger bag. He'd long since gotten rid of the expensive leather one. The flap popped open a little and a tiny black nose poked out.

Remington lifted the flap a little to see Pepe, his pet skunk, holding the Gram doll tight to his chest and sniffing the air.

"Almost done, little fella," Remington said, and petted his head.

Pepe made two small circles around the bottom of the bag and curled up and went back to sleep.

Jackie smiled and shook her head. "What am I gonna do with you two?"

"Live happily ever after?" Remington asked.

"Sounds like a good plan," she said, and pecked him on the cheek.

Brant smiled at them from the pulpit and winked at his son.

New hope indeed.

Epilogue

Savannah Smiles

Troy Clint Bodean pushed his Outback Tea Stained straw cowboy

hat back on his head. The sun was hot and the sand was even hotter. He jogged up the steps to the Sonesta hotel and trotted over to the bar.

“Hey, hey, amigo!” Gino shouted over the music blaring from the radio. “What are we drinking? Pina Colada?”

Troy held up his hand. “Wish I could, brother. But I gotta bus to catch.”

A girl at the end of the bar turned around and smiled. “Can’t I at least get you a beer?”

Troy smiled at Mindy. She looked good. A couple of days of bed rest and hydration and she was as good as new.

“Maybe just one,” he said, tossing his duffle bag down under a nearby stool.

“What’ll it be?” she asked.

Gino looked at him expectantly.

“How about a couple of Coronas,” Troy said, “with oranges.”

Gino nodded and stomped away, thumping his chest and singing along with the music.

“You could stay, ya know,” Mindy said, fiddling with a paper coaster.

“Ya, I could,” Troy said, “but you and I both know how that would go. And besides that, you’ll be back at school, right?”

Mindy had decided to go back and finish her degree, but she’d enrolled in the University of Miami so she could stay close to her dad.

“Yeah,” she said, “that’s right.”

Gino delivered the beers and set a napkin between them with four orange slices on it.

“What will you do?” she asked Troy.

Troy took a long sip of his beer. “I got a line on something up in Georgia,” he said. “It ain’t much, but I’ve never needed much.”

“Will you be working on the beach again?” she asked.

Troy laughed. "Heck no, but I'll be close enough to the water to get a little fishin' in from time to time."

"Good," she said, and sipped her beer.

"I'm truly sorry about your sister," he said. "I wish things had worked out differently."

Mindy nodded, her eyes glistening. "I loved her so much," she said. "I just wish I could've told her that one last time."

Troy cleared his throat and thought about calling his brother. He would do that once he got on the bus.

"Hey, hey, Amigo," Gino said, and pointed at the door.

Another Sonesta employee was waving to Troy.

"It looks like your taxi is here," Gino said.

Troy took a deep breath. He reached for his wallet, but Gino held up his hand.

"This one is on me, friend," he said.

Troy took his hand and shook it. "Thanks, amigo."

"Don't be a stranger, okay?" Gino said, and laughed.

Troy laughed too. "You got it."

He turned to Mindy and shouldered his bag. "Be sure to tell your dad thanks for the bus ticket," he said.

"He tried to give you some extra money to help out," she said, shaking her head. "Why wouldn't you take it?"

"Sweetie," Troy said as he pecked her on the cheek, "money can't buy you happiness."

"But it *can* buy you a yacht to pull up alongside it," she said, smiling.

Troy laughed. "I'll see you around, kiddo."

"Yeah," Mindy said, and smiled a sad smile.

They both knew he'd never be back this way again. And that was okay.

Troy trotted through the lobby of the Sonesta and slumped down in the taxi. They drove onto the causeway and off the island. Two streets over, they stopped at the bus station. Troy reached for his wallet again.

The cabbie held up his hand. "It's already been paid for, sir. A young woman called in to pay earlier."

Troy nodded. Mindy.

He stretched his arms over his head as the cab drove away. Several passengers were throwing bags into a pile beside the bus to be loaded underneath. Troy added his bag to the pile and walked up to the open door.

"Savannah?" the bus driver asked.

Troy tipped his hat and said. "Yup."

He handed his ticket to the man and walked back to the back of

the bus. He found an empty seat and waited.

As the bus finally lurched forward out of the station, Troy had drifted off to sleep while humming the words to *Lola* in his head.

Afterword

And here we are... Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller #3. As I write this, Deep Wave—A Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller #2 is being edited and prepared for launch has launched! I can't believe how far Troy has come and with this book, I feel like I'm visiting an old friend.

He's traveled his way up to Key Biscayne in Blood Wave, which allows me to revisit the time I spent living on the island so many years ago.

Many of the places (and some of the people) are completely real—though I've fictionalized their character for the sake of a fun read.

If you've ever been to Key Biscayne, walking down the beach to the southern end of the island to check out the Cape Florida Lighthouse is an absolute must. I'd recommend you go to the Sonesta as well, but it's long gone—replaced by the updated Oceana resort. I think Gino still works there though... if you stop by, tell him I said hello!

I intend to write Troy adventures as long as you read them. Here's to another rousing, romping, rambunctious ride!

A Final Word: As I come to the end of the newest Troy Bodean Tropical Thriller, I'm struck by how things all seem to work out in the end. I'm always sad to see these new characters come and go and when I reach the end, though I've usually decided where Troy will be next.

His next big adventure is already in the planning stages and will be a little bit of a departure from the usual storylines Troy gets messed up in, but I think you'll like it!

I'm calling it Dark Wave and I'm including the first few chapters for you following this note.

There you can sign up for my reader group so you'll be among the first to know when new Troy Bodean Tropical Thrillers are published!

Please be sure to visit TropicalThrillers.com/readergroup and join the Beachbum Brigade Reader Group so you'll be among the first to know about my promotions, events and specials!

Thank you, Kind Reader,

DB

Excerpt from Dark Wave

Paint By Numbers

The painting hung in a simple frame with no alarm sensors attached, no laser beams crisscrossing the room, and no iron gates to crash down if it was removed from the wall, all of which made it maddeningly simple to take it down, remove it from its frame, and walk casually out of the building with it rolled up in a long cardboard tube tucked nonchalantly under an arm. It would've made for a really boring heist movie, that's for sure. Had this been a more important work, perhaps a Monet or a Renoir, the security would've resembled something only Tom Cruise could handle. That said, a work of that caliber wouldn't be at the Jepson Center anyway. What the rest of the world didn't know yet, however, was that the artist was already dead... and the value of the painting would likely skyrocket once this was discovered.

The Jepson Center in Savannah, Georgia was home to the beautiful painting, titled *Savannah Smiling*, for a short run highlighting the stunning artwork of the up-and-coming young artist, Tayler Evan.

Jepson was often home to artists attending the local Savannah College of Art and Design. Normally, though, those young artist's works would be relegated to a back room or a side-wall in a little-used hallway. However, *Savannah Smiling* was displayed prominently... in front of more established artists with far more pieces. SS, as the museum's curators and workers began to refer to it as, was Evan's only artwork on display. But it truly was a beautiful piece, comprising the timeless melancholy of an Andrew Wyeth, mixed with the raw emotion and power of a Claire Tabouret.

Savannah Smiling was a portrait of a young black girl wearing a yellow dress and standing under a weeping willow. A dangling tuft of Spanish Moss draped over one shoulder, and sunlight fell across her face, illuminating a smile that would soon be compared to the enigmatic visage of the Mona Lisa. In contrast, in the distance beyond the girl the landscape was burning. Not in open flame, but ashes smoldering everywhere. The effect it had on viewers was layered.

First, you saw the beauty of the image and the quality of the technique used to produce it. Fine brush strokes that you could see, but which slowly became invisible as your eyes focused more on the subject matter. And then came the symbolism... beyond the fact that this was a black girl, standing in front of a burning field and who may or may not be smiling – that was still up for debate – there was her left shoulder. The infamous dark patch of skin on that shoulder had many convinced she was bruised there, while others claimed it was only a birthmark. Some said it was a shadow, though there was nothing represented in the painting to have cast one.

Scholars had come from far and wide to discuss the meaning and metaphor behind the painting, and so many theories had been floated that the piece was quickly becoming a cult-like interpretation project in art schools around the country. Art lovers everywhere had been captivated by the symbolism and beauty of the two-feet by three-feet oil on canvas painting.

The work's estimated value, as established by the curator of the museum, was probably in the neighborhood of ten-thousand dollars – not too shabby for a new artist. But the thief knew the real money was to be made from the work of dead artists – even contemporary dead artists. Without the money to procure a piece that was already priceless due to the artist's expiry, the thief hatched a nefarious plot to select an artist generating a lot of buzz over limited works, and orchestrate their death.

And upon reading the piece by local art critic Mortimer LeFleur in the Savannah Morning News, the thief knew immediately that Tayler Evan's painting fitted the bill perfectly.

Nestled between the photo gallery proudly displaying the Heels-N-Halligans Night at Pooler Wild Wing Café, and the dreary news of Savannah's new downtown shuttle plan, was a small section dedicated to Mr. LeFleur's column. As a professor at SCAD – the Savannah College of Art and Design, often said with derision by its students – Mortimer was constantly exposed to many works of art that were neither exceptional nor valuable in any sense of the word. Most of his columns were two paragraphs calendar entries detailing new displays at local museums. However, his piece on Tayler's Savannah Smiling had been different. Waxing lyrical, LeFleur went on and on about the beauty and social commentary of the piece. He even compared it to the great works of the past and the hottest contemporary artists around the art world. He wrote three passionate paragraphs of exposition on the qualities he believed would make the painting a classic studied for decades to come. *And, by the way, it will be on display at the Jepson for the next month. Be sure to check the museum's hours, and as always, group discounts are available.*

Careful planning was essential to make young Tayler Evan's death appear to be a suicide. It might take a week or so for his body to be found, and until then, no one would notice that Savannah Smiling no longer hung in the Jepson Center. The thief had simply replaced the painting with a poster print of the image, initially bought for ten bucks in the gift shop. It didn't have the texture of the brush strokes, but the giclée printing technique the thief had used was high enough definition to fool most casual patrons. It was easy to tell it was a print if you got close enough and knew what to look for, but a dangling velvet rope kept most viewers a few feet away and limited their view... and all the thief needed was a week before it was discovered missing to get the painting sold.

Poor Tayler was hanging by his worn out brown American Rebel belt from a gorgeous weathered beam in his downtown loft.

The easy part had been getting an invite back to the young artist-in-heat's place for a nightcap after a rambunctious celebratory night out at the bar. Heady with excitement over the growing furor around his painting, his new contract to produce labels with some wine company in Amsterdam, and the first sale offer of a few thousand dollars for Savannah Smiling, Tayler had been tossing back shots his friends kept buying for him all night. His judgment was impaired to say the least.

The tough part had been subduing him with a spiked cocktail – not too strong to suggest an intentional overdose, but strong enough to render the six-foot-one artist unconscious – and then lift his heavy body up to the beam twelve-feet above the sumptuous reclaimed hardwood floor. It had been nearly impossible, the thief's latex gloves slick with sweat, but he was determined, and had eventually hoisted Taylor up, his belt around his throat, and hung him from the beam.

He'd stirred once, when his body realized it wasn't receiving enough oxygen, but by then it was too late. The belt tightened dangerously around his throat, and the up-and-coming artist was suddenly down-and-going before he could reach up and grab the beam. A well-placed chair – toppled under the body – would create a believable suicide scene for the local police department. The thief considered leaving an angsty, melancholy note, but decided against it lest there were fibers and microbes and handwriting experts to pounce on any miniscule clues left behind. As it was, there were no clues at all... he'd committed the perfect crime.

The thief had stood beneath the dangling body and took a sip from the artist's open bottle of Beaux Freres Pinot Noir. Tayler was a good-looking kid. Dark skin, wild, untamed black hair, skinny, and tall. And based on the wine choice, he also had good taste. The thief regretted killing him. But, to make the painting worth anything, the artist had

to die.

And now, moments after switching the poster with the original and walking out of the anachronistic white Jepson Center building, the thief with the cardboard tube drew absolutely no attention at all. Not a single person glanced in the thief's direction, not even the dude sweeping the floor before they locked up for the night.

It was a beautiful sunset, still plenty of light, yet...

No one... saw... anything!

The thief pulled out his cell phone. Three messages. Clicking on the phone, the thief noticed the latex gloves were still on. Pulling them off and stuffing them into a jacket pocket, he clicked out a message, jumped onto a scooter propped on a nearby light post, and pattered away into the slowly descending darkness.

Catch Me If You Can

Troy Clint Bodean swung the Cheetah Marine Catamaran deftly

through the narrow channel. On both sides of the boat, marsh grasses three to four-feet tall created a dense corridor for his tour to follow. Startled Susie birds, as Troy called them – or Woodland Storks, as others knew them – took off alone and in pairs as the boat motored past.

Troy was more than comfortable with passenger tours, having flown his brother's seaplane ferry to Fort Jefferson off of Key West for over a year. As he steered he launched into memorized details about the surrounding lowlands, including its variety of plant and animal life.

The part-time loading work (and sometimes sanitary engineer – janitor – if old Bobo didn't make it in to work) at the Telfair Museum served as his primary income, but since he hadn't found reasonably priced housing in Savannah, he'd taken this job as a secondary source of money.

His roommate had a swanky place and loved the fact Troy was almost never home. And Troy adored the downtown digs he could have never afforded on his own wages. Even if he was never there, it was a fantastic place to hang his hat.

One more turn around the channel and his last boat ride of the shift would be over. He didn't have anything to do at the museum tonight, so he thought he might hit the Rail Pub and grab a beer and a bite to eat. He might even see if the roomie was home and wanted to hang. It was always good to have a wingman around.

Troy droned on a few more lines about the flora and fauna, and his passengers were duly impressed. The three very large people on this last trip, Mama Cass, Daddy Cass, and Toddler Cass, spent more time trying to tuck their triple chins under their life jackets than they did actually checking out the scenery. The rotund toddler had cried relentlessly for the first half hour, but thankfully she had passed out and was still asleep now. Troy commented how cute she was, Mama

Cass now firmly in his fan club. Daddy Cass, however, gave Troy dirty looks for the rest of the ride.

When it was over, Mama Cass slipped Troy a fifty-dollar bill for helping to carry Toddler Cass off the boat and tuck her safely into her car seat.

“Aw, shucks, ma’am,” Troy had said, “It’s all part of the job.”

Daddy Cass thanked him for the expert information and begrudgingly slipped him a twenty-dollar bill – probably unaware Mama Cass had already tipped him excessively. Troy didn’t let on.

An hour later, after docking the boat and wiping down the equipment on board, Troy hopped on his bicycle and pedaled down the path beside Highway 80, grabbing for his Outback tea stained straw cowboy hat more than once when the wind threatened to blow it off his head. After another thirty minutes, he cruised into Midtown and turned onto Barnard Street, where a three-story, red-painted brick building came into view. Home sweet home.

Savannah was an amazing city and Troy found he liked it better and better every day. He’d actually started to picture himself settling down in a place like this. The oldest city in Georgia boasted numerous beautifully manicured parks for afternoon strolls, amazing antebellum architecture around quaint cobblestone streets, incredible food and drinks at establishments he couldn’t afford (until he proved he was a local), and Tybee Island – home to sailing, fishing, and bike riding. That’s where he’d gotten his tour boat job and purchased a broken-down bike to repair for transportation to and from work.

His new home was an incredible old building with all the charm of the city, the urban feel of a loft, and the modern conveniences of a brand-new apartment. He parked the bike, a yellow Schwinn Sunrider model with only one gear, down at street level. Unlooping a chain from under his seat, he clicked the lock closed and dialed the combination wheel to scramble the numbers.

He buzzed the front door and waited. Nothing. After thirty seconds or so, he buzzed again. *Okay, well, roomie must be out shopping or something.*

He buzzed a different unit.

“Yeah?” crackled a voice through the speaker.

“Janie, can you buzz me up?” Troy asked. “Nobody home at my place.”

“Who is this?” Janie asked and coughed, probably smoking a cigarette in the building even though it was prohibited.

“It’s Troy, Janie,” he said.

“Troy who?”

“You’re kiddin’, right?”

The crackly voice laughed until she erupted in another hacking fit.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “I’m just givin’ you a hard time.”

Janie was the longest standing resident in the building, so by default, she was kind of the property manager. If something needed fixing, you asked Janie. If someone was breaking a rule, you told Janie. If someone moved out, Janie rented the new place. She was the one who’d placed the ad for a roommate in the local paper that Troy had answered the moment he stepped off the Greyhound bus. Luckily, his new roommate had been a little desperate to share costs and had waived the down payment when he moved in.

“C’m on up,” Janie said, and the buzzer did its thing.

The door clicked, and a second later Troy was jogging up the old wooden stairs, rumored to be leftover lumber from some ship or other that was dismantled after a massive wreck.

The walls were painted in bright colors so thick they might have had thirty coats, and the handrails were worn silky smooth and had no varnish left on them. It was a highly desirable location to live... and highly expensive. Troy had answered the ad because it asked for a roommate with very inexpensive rent – at least for the area. He met with the guy and they hit it off. Troy felt sure his roommate liked him because he’d be paying part of his mortgage but would only be there on a very minimal basis. Troy liked it because it was ‘bitchen.

Janie lived down the hall from them. Her door was open and she was leaning out watching for Troy. She stood hunched over an aluminum cane that had a triangle of tennis balls on the bottom – to keep the legs from scratching the floor.

“Hello, handsome,” she wheezed, “how’s the river biz?”

“Not bad today,” Troy called down the hall with a wave. “Good tips.”

“Nice,” she said, smiling. “Gonna take an old lady out to dinner?”

“Ha-ha.” Troy spouted a fake laugh and dodged the question.

“Anybody ever tell you that you look like Tom Selleck?” she asked. “Not Blue Bloods Tom Selleck, but Magnum P.I. Tom Selleck, or maybe Quigley Down Under Tom Selleck.”

Troy laughed again. “Thanks, Janie.”

She stood watching him as he walked toward his door. He gave it a quick courtesy knock, but no one answered. His roommate had been known to have an occasional rendezvous in the loft, but he always warned Troy when he’d be busy and needed him to blow off coming home for a bit. Another very minor inconvenience to live in this amazing place.

Jingling around in his pocket, he found the key – his only key. He slid it in the lock and walked into the great room.

Right in front of him was the living room, with two dark leather couches and a light khaki recliner. Troy had spent more than one

afternoon snoozing in that with the Georgia Bulldogs game playing on the forty-seven-inch 4K TV, a pretty cool touch to the rough-hewn antique look of the rest of the apartment. To his left was the bathroom and two separate bedroom doors. To his right was the kitchen, its bright red cabinets, brown, tan, and black speckled quartz countertops, and stainless-steel appliances making it worthy of any gourmet chef.

Above him, in the twenty-foot-high cathedral ceiling, were beautiful, reclaimed wood beams crisscrossing the massive opening. And dangling from the center of the room, with his belt around his throat, was his roommate, Tayler Evan – dead of apparent suicide.

“Dangit,” Troy muttered.

He poked his head back out into the hall and saw Janie had disappeared back inside her apartment. He walked down and knocked on her door. She answered smiling with more than a little surprise on her face, and Troy shook his head as if to dismiss whatever lewd thoughts she was thinking.

“We’ve got a problem,” he said.

Dragon Reign

“**Y**ou killed me, dude,” Alain Montgomery exclaimed while

throwing his arms up in the air. “That’s really not cool, bro!”

“I had nothing to do with your untimely death, Alain,” said RayRay Tishomura softly. “You just rolled poorly.”

“Gah!” Alain inhaled and slapped the character sheet that had been lying in front of him. “Can I get back in?”

“Yes,” RayRay said, running his fingers over a map. “If you have another cleric that is tenth level or higher, I can respawn you at The Glade.”

“Naturally.” Alain picked up his backpack. “I think I have Finegan, who’s level twelve.”

“Then you may rejoin your companions on the next turn,” RayRay said and nodded – almost toward Alain.

Alain pulled a folder out of his pack that had an airbrushed red dragon and a gold armored rider with long flowing white hair on the front. He shuffled through a stack of pages and finally found what he was looking for. He pulled it out and laid it on the table in front of him.

“Ready for action,” Alain said while rubbing his hands together.

“Roll for your gear.” RayRay handed Alain a sheet of paper with a list of suitable campaign items listed on it numbered one through twenty. “Five rolls.”

Alain picked up a twenty-sided die and began rolling.

“Okay, geez,” Becky Patton said, exhaling. “Are you two done?”

RayRay inclined his head – almost in her direction.

“Yes, Becky,” he said quietly. “You may resume your turn. But don’t forget that Alain’s mage is no longer in your party.”

“I know that,” she responded. “He got butchered by that troll back there.”

“What do you wish to do with his body?” RayRay asked, picking up a special keyboard to make a note.

“Burn it,” said Samantha, who’d been studying the map in front of

them. "If we leave it here or bury it, the undead will just turn him and use him against us."

"What?" Alain looked up from his rolling.

"Sorry, dude." Samantha shrugged her shoulders. "Nothin' personal."

RayRay cocked his head. "It's true, Alain. The undead would come for him for sure. He is too powerful to remain dead."

"Ugh." Alain pursed his lips. "Fine. Do it."

"I cast fireball on his body," Samantha said.

RayRay handed her a die. "Roll for damage. If it's a seven or better, he is fully consumed beyond resurrection."

Samantha took the die and rolled. It was a seven.

"Thanks a lot," Alain groaned, and crumpled the character sheet of his thirteenth level mage. "I'll remember that."

Samantha winked at him. "I know you will."

"Oh, my, gosh," Becky grunted, "can we just get on with the quest for cryin' out loud?"

The F-art Group – as they called themselves – was a group of students all in their Junior years at SCAD... except for Becky, she was a Sophomore.

Alain Montgomery – the brown-haired Harry Potter-esque looking kid complete with thick round glasses – had founded the group during his second year at SCAD as a way to insulate himself from the incessant critique of the other students. It was an easy way to say, *who cares, I still have friends*, when someone tore down your work. Which was often, as Alain wasn't much of a painter... and that was putting it mildly.

RayRay was blind. And Japanese. He had jet-black anime style hair, pale skin, and pale, milky eyes. He'd come to SCAD to develop his considerable skills as a sculptor, and by all accounts was well on his way to becoming a great one. His skill was all the more incredible due to his completely useless eyes... which were really odd to look at, as RayRay had originally refused to wear dark lensed glasses to hide them.

After just a week of RayRay being in the group, his friends had conspired to fix the uncomfortable situation. Becky had snuck into his dorm room one evening while he was showering – offering her an unfortunate glance at RayRay in all his pale nakedness – and stolen his glasses. Jogging out into the hall, Samantha and Alain waited with a similar pair of frames that had blacked out lenses. They popped the lenses out of the other frame, and thankfully they fit into RayRay's. Then Becky replaced them in his room. She'd originally frozen thinking herself busted when he stepped from the shower into his room with no towel and no clothes – a sight she would shudder over

for months – but then she relaxed remembering he couldn't see her. She stood dead still until he went back in the bathroom to brush his teeth or something, and dropped the newly darkened glasses back onto his bedside table.

They all thought he might know the truth about the lenses and had played along just so he wouldn't creep them out anymore.

Becky, the youngest of the group, was the girl who blended in... Little Miss Average. Just average in every way. Brownish hair, brownish eyes, cute smile – but not uniquely cute – and a pretty average talent at painting. She would pass her classes, but she certainly wouldn't set the art world on fire.

And then there was Samantha. Young, beautiful, flawless black skin, smart, and talented. She'd come to SCAD to... well, no one in the group knew her story. But after she'd been there a year it was clear she had exceptional talent for fashion design. She was already getting offers from design houses in New York and Los Angeles, and most of her class professors really liked her and pushed her to break barriers and scoff at convention... to trust her instincts, as they had proven time and time again to be fantastic.

This unlikely group of friends had originally convened at a local coffee house to sip at ubiquitously pretentious cups of java in tall paper cups with cardboard sleeves, but after they'd discovered RayRay was a long-time role-playing campaign master, they'd convinced him to take them through an adventure. He'd dug out an old campaign from the nineties called Dragon Reign, in which the group must rescue a white dragon, make an alliance with the dragon army that the evil wizard Reign is building, and convince them to rise up against their evil leader.

They'd completed this campaign in forty-eight hours and they were all hooked. Since then, they'd been meeting every Tuesday and Thursday night to play. They all had several characters, and could perform different roles as needed across different campaigns. The current quest had them on the hunt for a massive troll treasure that would make their characters rich beyond their wildest dreams. Which RayRay would most likely not allow to happen... thus, Alain's mage had to die.

"Hey," Alain said as he finished rolling for his characters equipment, "does anybody wanna get a pizza?"

"Only if it's veggie," said Becky.

"I could eat some too," Samantha chimed in.

"Veggie?" Alain grimaced. "What's wrong with you people? I was thinking meat-eaters."

Samantha cocked an eyebrow. "Oh, hell no. I ain't eatin' that greasy mess. You knock yourself out, but get me 'n Becky a veggie

lovers.”

“RayRay?” Alain looked at the blind boy out of habit. “You in for meat?”

RayRay shrugged. “I can eat any of the above.”

“Okay, good,” Alain said and pulled out his phone. “I’ll call and get two mediums. Who’s got cash?”

The others exchanged glances out of the corners of their eyes.

“Shit!” Alain said. “Okay, I’ll get this one, but you jerks owe me.”

“Done.” Becky said, and picked up a twenty-sided die and handed it to Samantha. “Now, can we please get on with finding this troll?”

Samantha Smiling

Samantha Eliza Dawn took the bright red die that looked like a twenty-sided diamond. Rolling it around between her fingers, she consulted her character sheet and some notes she'd made about RayRay's incredibly detailed setting for their most recent campaign.

"Is there a weaver," she asked – looking at RayRay, who obviously couldn't look back – "or tailor in this town?"

RayRay cocked his head to the side. "Why, yes. Yes, there is... just down the main road a bit. You see a green sign with gold outline that reads: Tapestrano?"

He waited for her to issue the command.

"Tapestrano, eh?" she asked. "I'm going there. You guys coming with me?"

"I'm in," Becky said, quickly raising her hand.

"I'm not going in there," Alain spat with disdain. "Where's the tavern, RayRay?"

The Japanese boy moved his head slightly toward Alain's voice. "Sadly, after asking around, you find that there isn't one... hasn't been one since the—"

"Wait, what?" Alain interrupted. "No tavern? What the hell kind of town is this?"

"Unfortunately, Alain-san," RayRay said in a dodgy Japanese accent, "you discover that the building that once held the tavern is a burned-out mess of ash and blackened beams."

"Well, hell," Alain retorted, throwing up his hands, "what am I supposed to do while the women-folk are off shopping for clothes?"

"To discover things about the town," RayRay said patiently, "you must ask the locals."

Alain sighed. "Okay, okay. Is there anyone in the street?"

"There're several people walking around. A man with a red beard, a woman with a shawl tucked tightly over her hair, and a—"

"Yeah, yeah." Alain held up a hand to stop RayRay. "I ask the guy with the beard if there's any place to get a drink."

“He tells you the tavern was burned in a raid last month,” RayRay said. “He believes it was the troll.”

Alain pursed his lips and sniffed.

“But,” RayRay said, smiling behind his dark glasses, “he says there’s a brothel near the outskirts of town.”

“Boom!” Alain clapped his hands together. “I’m there. You girls have a good time looking for cloth, I’m gon’ get me sump’n sump’n out at the—” He paused waiting for RayRay to supply him with the name of the brothel.

“Oh, uh, the Home of the Belly Djinn,” the Japanese boy said.

“Yeah.” Alain nodded. “The Home of the Jelly Bellies.”

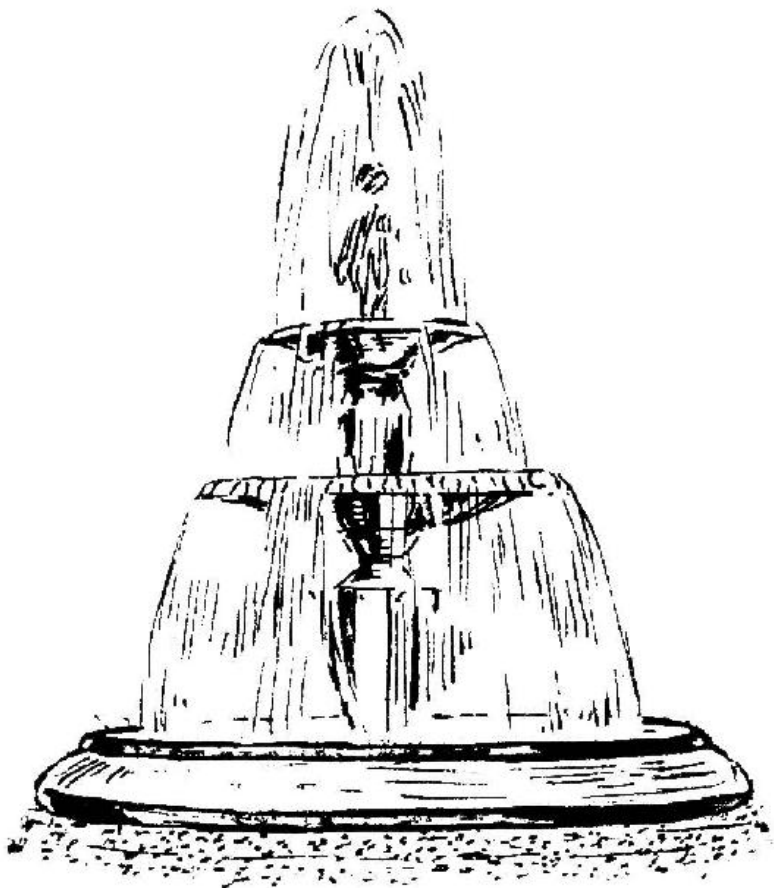
“Belly Djinn,” RayRay corrected him.

“Whatever,” Alain said. “I’ll start walking. Bye girls.”

Samantha arched an eyebrow at him, while Becky rolled her eyes.

“Okay,” Samantha said, glancing at her sheet. “I’m going to the Tapestrano.”

RayRay smiled. “As you wish.”



SAMANTHA HADN'T ALWAYS BEEN a role-player. In fact, before Alain had invited them into the F-art group and then subsequently to his home to have RayRay run a campaign for them, she hadn't known what it meant to play at all. She'd only said she'd play just so she wouldn't have to leave the group... they had become friends... good friends.

Her only friends.

So, she rolled up a character, a magic-using elf, and called her Mantha. Naturally, RayRay had suggested she make her elf a Dar-elf from the North – a dark-skinned race of elves that lived by a questionable code of honor and dubious motives. Samantha strongly opposed that, declaring it was racist of RayRay to even suggest such a thing.

“If I gotta be black in the real world,” Samantha had said, “I ain’t gonna be black in this one.”

RayRay had quickly backed down from his suggestion and apologized. He hadn't meant any disrespect and had explained that

he'd thought of the Dra-elves as a strong and beautiful race of beings.

"Please forgive me, Samantha. I didn't realize you were black," he'd said.

And that's when it occurred to her that RayRay didn't – couldn't – see her as a black girl. To him, she was Samantha... just Samantha. And then it was her turn to apologize. And after finding out that the Dra-elves were ten times more powerful with magic, she'd decided to be one, and proudly. Her fifteenth level mage was the most powerful in the group... by far.

They played for months before Samantha began to realize that she enjoyed it... no, that she *loved* it. Perhaps because it was a world in which she could do anything, be anyone, go anywhere she wanted. A far cry from the world she lived in.

But lately, things had gotten so much better. And ever since she'd met Tayler, she'd started to realize that she had dreams, goals, ambitions... and she actually believed they might come true.

Aged just thirteen Samantha ran away from home. Her father, an angry hulk of a man, would come in from work with whiskey on his breath and blood on his knuckles. Whatever beating he'd taken down at the bar he would then take out on Samantha and her mother. Her beautiful mother, God rest her soul. She deflected most of the anger away from Samantha, but so much abuse had eventually taken a final, mortal toll on her. She officially died of natural causes, but Samantha believed her mother had simply decided she didn't want to live anymore. She left the earth to find peace. Samantha prayed that she would.

The only problem was that without her mother around, Samantha began to suffer all the beatings; sometimes with his hands, other times with his belt. Once he hit her so hard that she thought she'd lose a tooth.

When she turned twelve, her body started to mature. Looking in the mirror, she began to see a young woman looking back, not a little girl. Unfortunately, it changed the way her father looked at her too. He would go from saying she was a slut and that she was screwing half the town, to breathing heavy on her neck and rubbing his lips against hers. He never touched her, but she began to fear that he would... eventually. On some especially drunken night, he would forget who she was and then he would...

Samantha decided she wasn't going to wait around for that to happen. She packed the few things she owned – a couple of sundresses, a toothbrush, a tattered Bible, and a comb for her hair – and after her father left for work, she walked out the door with a pillow case slung over her shoulder.

She walked right past the school and down to the highway, and a

couple hitched rides later, she landed in Carrollton, Georgia. Before long, she was discovered living in an abandoned tractor-trailer behind the Southbound Industrial Park.

From there she was placed in a foster home. And, unlike so many horror stories she'd heard, her foster home was loving, caring, and supportive. Jeff and Betsy Avery took her in as their own child. Anything and everything she needed was provided for her... as well as things she never dreamed she'd own. A bed... her own bed!

On her sixteenth birthday, they'd offered to buy her a car, but she said she wanted something else. She wanted a set of oil paints and some canvases. Along with a small silver Honda Prelude, they bought her a painting starter kit from the local art store, and she began to paint. She soon discovered her love for painting imaginary dresses, gowns, and blouses she'd want to wear herself.

Other people began to notice too, and ask where she'd copied the painting from so they could buy the clothes. Betsy and Jeff Avery immediately began to feed her passion; art supply trips every Saturday, trips to museums, trips to galleries... they did it all.

Then Samantha had found it. A small brochure tucked in a plexiglass display at the art store downtown. Savannah College of Art and Design.

That's what she wanted. And so, the tuition was paid. Jeff and Betsy rented a truck and moved Samantha in, all three with beaming smiles on their faces.

Meeting Tayler caused the next crack in her wall. He'd looked at her like she was beautiful... but not like, *I want to do you*, beautiful. More like... *I really want to capture you on canvas* beautiful. And she had let him. She didn't love Tayler, no, he wasn't her type, but she'd grown so close to him that many of their friends thought they were dating. He took photos of her and taped them to his dorm room wall, and he drew sketches of her, insisting that someday she should sit for him... so he could paint her.

She refused, not willing to believe she was worthy of the paint he would waste on it... but he insisted and persisted. He asked her every single day.

"Please," he begged. "I must capture you."

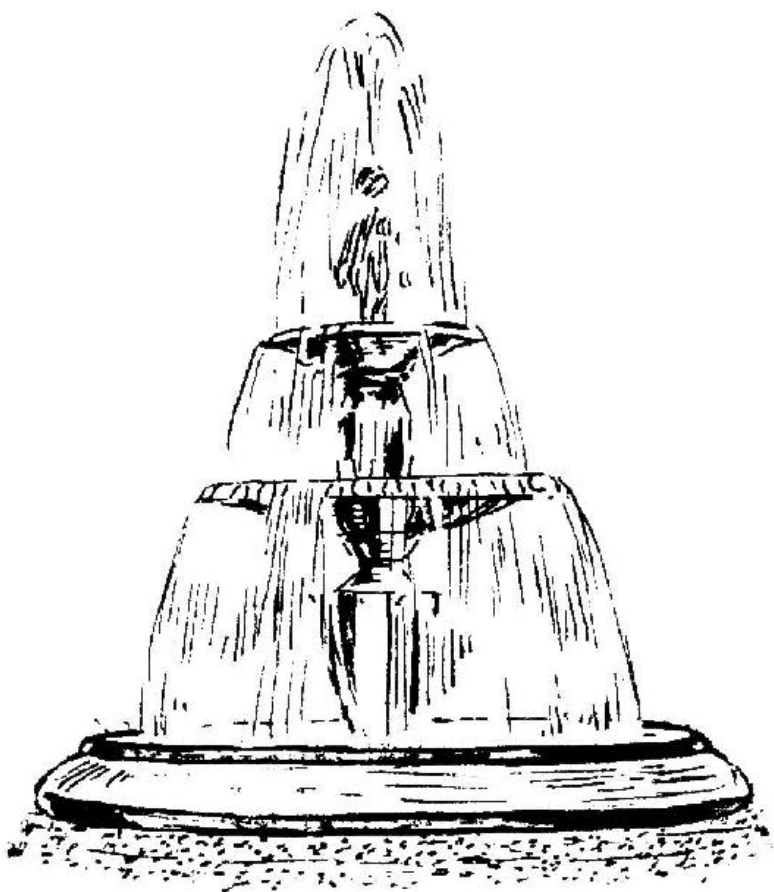
"Tayler," she said, "I'm free. I never want to be captive again."

"Then let me set you free," he pleaded. "Immortal beauty like yours must be painted so that it will last for all time."

"No," she said quietly, and would often cry after she'd turned him down.

But one day she was finally able to shake off that nasty, dirty, guilty feeling her father had hung on her shoulders, and let Tayler paint her. She let go of her inhibitions... she smiled. And when she

saw Tayler's stunning, beautiful, breath-taking painting... she smiled inside too.



SAMANTHA ROLLED THE TWENTY-SIDED DIE: seventeen. That was a high enough roll to allow her character, Mantha, to convince the owner of the fictional store to show her the magic cloth she was after. RayRay described it as a color-changing cloth, sometimes appearing gray, sometimes green, and sometimes blue. Mantha haggled with the merchant, and rolled again to confirm she was able to talk him into the lowest acceptable price. The elf-mage walked away from the man carrying the cloth she would fashion into a magical Cloak of Concealing. Becky Patton clapped slowly at the display of gamesmanship.

“Stunning,” she said, grinning. “Absolutely stunning.”

“Thanks,” Samantha said, winking. “Now let’s go find an ale.”

“Sweet,” Becky said, “but I’m definitely not going to the home of the belly buttons or whatever.”

“The Home of the Belly Djinn,” RayRay corrected her in exasperation.

“K, cool,” Samantha said. “Now, RayRay, tell us where we can get those ales.”

“Roll your die to see if the locals will tell you where to go.”

He held up a blue twelve-sided die and Becky took it from his hand.

“Six or better and you get your drink,” he said.

Becky rolled the die. “Seven!”

Samantha and Becky high-fived.

“Alright, RayRay,” she said, “spill it. Where’s the booze?”

“After receiving many strange looks from the townspeople, you bump into an old man with a patch over one eye.” RayRay launched into his campaign-master story voice. “He claims to be Sir William of Murrell, and says he has a fine brew from the barleys on his farm.”

“Take us there, one-eyed Willie.” Samantha smacked her lips. “We’s thirsty!”

RayRay pursed his lips, then finally said, “Sir William of Murrell beckons you to follow him.”

END OF EXCERPT

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BLOOD WAVE

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